

# English Literature

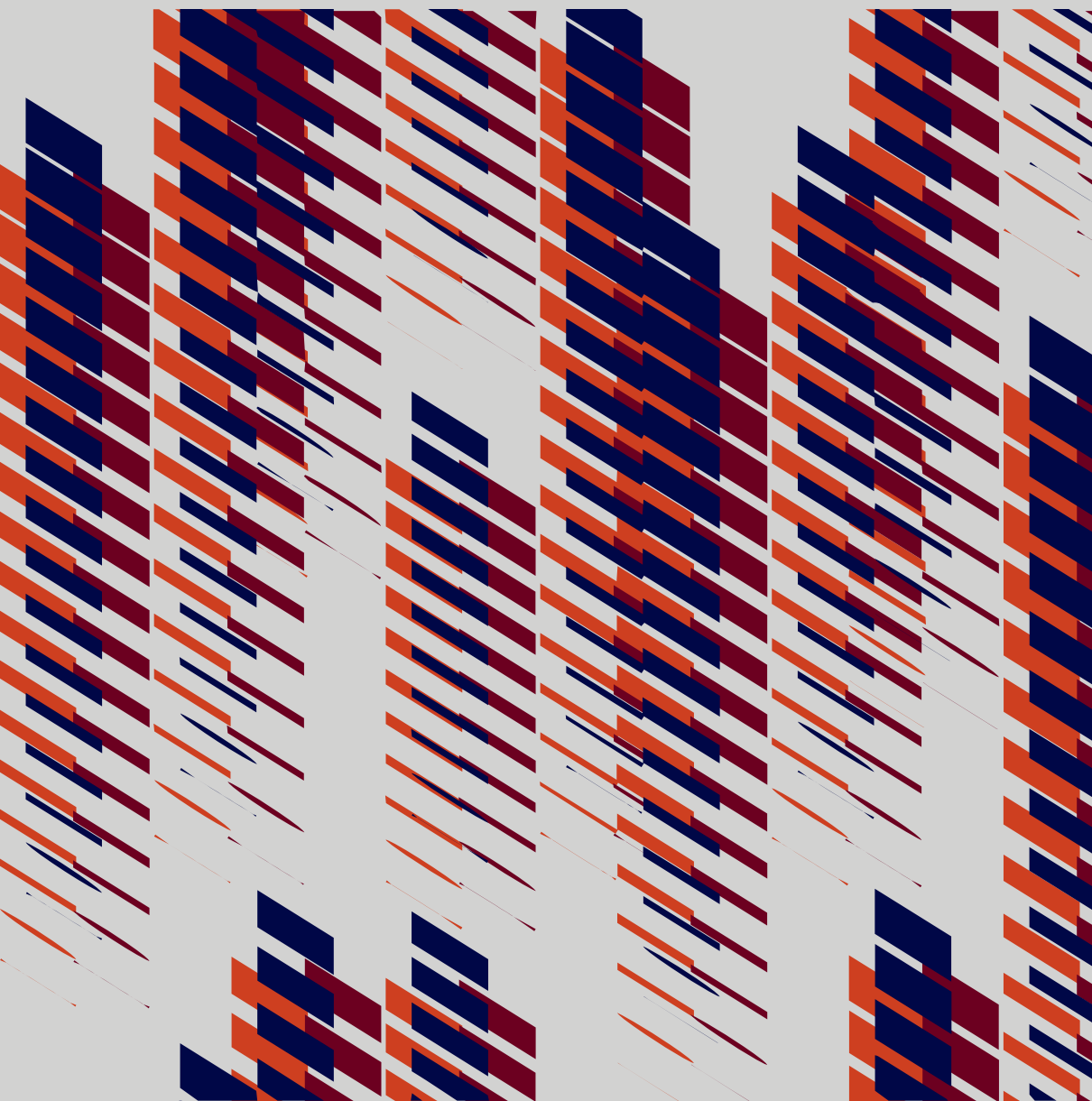
Theories, Interpretations, Contexts

Vol. 2 – Num. 2 – December 2015

e-ISSN 2420-823X



**Edizioni**  
Ca'Foscari





# English Literature

ISSN 2420-823X

Rivista semestrale diretta da | Semiannual Journal, General Editor  
Flavio Gregori

Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing  
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia  
Dorsoduro 3246  
30123 Venezia  
<http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/riv/dbr/10/EnglishLiterature>

# English Literature

## Rivista semestrale | Semiannual Journal

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Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Palazzo Cosulich - Dorsoduro 1405

30123 Venezia | Italy

[english.lit@unive.it](mailto:english.lit@unive.it)

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Progetto grafico di copertina: Studio Girardi, Venezia | Edizioni Ca' Foscari

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# **Victorian Literature and the Aesthetic Impure**

Edited by  
Mariaconcetta Costantini





## Introduction

Mariaconcetta Costantini

(Università degli Studi G. d'Annunzio di Chieti-Pescara, Italia)

The Victorians witnessed an important process of reconceptualisation of aesthetic principles, which was closely intertwined with the social and economic transformations of their age. Questions concerning beauty, artistic value and the enjoyment of artworks had been raised powerfully during the Enlightenment, when «the word [aesthetic] and several important senses of the term [...] came into existence» (Grady 2009, p. 5). This legacy had a strong impact on the following century. First appropriated and reworked by the Romantics, aesthetic concepts were further developed by later artists and philosophers, who participated in lively debates on the nature of the artistic and the beautiful.

Such debates came to play a central role in nineteenth-century Britain. While reflecting on theories formulated by their predecessors both at home and abroad, Victorian intellectuals tackled specific problems posed by phenomena that were altering their own socioeconomic system. Two main triggers of artistic concerns were the rise of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, and the growth of a commodity culture fostered by the flourishing capitalist economy. Both phenomena fuelled controversies over the quality of mass-produced artworks, the changing relationship between producer and consumer, and the consequences of an increasing democratisation of taste. In coping with such preoccupations, the Victorians cleared the way for new aesthetic views. If some espoused eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century principles, which kept influencing their cultural milieu, others came to terms with the ongoing social changes by developing alternative notions of what constituted beauty, pleasure and art.

The relevance that 'impure' forms of production, consumption and appreciation of artworks acquired in Victorian culture proves that mid- to late-century Britain was a crucial site of aesthetic rethinking – one in which the strongly-felt effects of capitalism highlighted some limits and contradictions of pre-Victorian theories. What many Victorians became aware of, for example, was the failure of an objective pursued by eighteenth-century philosophers, who had searched for unifying aesthetic standards amid the endless variety of subjective experiences. Though stigmatised by purists, this awareness was favoured by the nineteenth-century proliferation of

tastes and styles, which attracted manifold thinkers. The latter's interest in what lacked purity and universality anticipated the twentieth-century scepticism about universally shared experiences, thereby laying the premises for modern theorisations.

This revisionary process was favoured by a particular historical conjuncture. The rapid transformation of nineteenth-century economy and society, the growth of a consumer-oriented market, the affirmation of a «popular 'aesthetic'» implying «the subordination of form to function» (Bourdieu 2010, p. 24), and the contamination of class lifestyles, created a fertile terrain for the germination of new thoughts. Besides detecting some weaknesses of the old philosophical agenda, the Victorians anticipated views that would become prominent in the following century, including the recognition that taste is no pure, shared and 'metaphysically' grounded notion.<sup>1</sup>

The above-mentioned redefinition of taste shows the extent to which the Victorians elaborated ideas inherited from eighteenth-century philosophy. Some problems they faced, for instance, had already emerged in the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant, who had become entangled in complexities for which he had offered unsatisfactory solutions. A main issue was to explain the nature of «the Judgement of Taste», a mental process of recognition of beauty that should reconcile subjective universality with subjective purposiveness and objective pleasure (Carritt 1962, pp. 69-71). Although Kant had attempted to disentangle this knot, some paradoxical aspects of his theory remained unsolved, including the question of the subjective/objective nature of aesthetic apprehension: «how can a judgement, empirical and depending on no conception, and predicating no quality of the object, but only our subjective feeling, claim to be valid for all men?» (p. 67). Equally controversial were the Kantian efforts «to separate 'disinterestedness', the sole guarantee of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from 'the interests of the senses', which defines the 'agreeable', and from the 'the interest of Reason', which defines 'the Good'» (Bourdieu 2010, p. 33). The difficulty of stripping pleasure of any «norms of morality and agreeableness» became fully discernible in Victorian culture, which witnessed the emergence of «the negative opposite of the Kantian aesthetic»: «popular 'aesthetic'» (p. 33).

«Primarily a formalism», which entailed an appreciation of beauty for its own sake, Kant's aesthetic doctrine remained significantly autonomous from practical ends. In the post-Kantian age, however, this autonomy was

1 In Aldo Marroni's view, such recognition is a distinctive feature of twentieth-century aesthetics, which conceives taste as a set of impure, mutable relations: «Il fatto di riconoscere che il gusto non può essere fondato su una struttura immutabile e disincarnata di valori 'metafisici' puri e condivisi, ma è l'esito di una rete fluttuante di relazioni in movimento nel tempo e determinata attraverso tutti gli strati sociali, lo fa apparire come quel forte sentire più aderente ai nostri tempi» (Marroni 2007, p. 201).

called into question by new philosophical theories,<sup>2</sup> as well as by the centrality that the idea of usefulness acquired in the production and consumption of artworks. In similar ways, the nineteenth century highlighted some contradictions inherent in the conceptualisation of 'pure' aesthetic experiences, which had led Kant to disallow «the 'lower senses' of taste, touch, and smell; sexual and erotic desire; and any merely subjective associations» (Grady 2009, pp. 6-7). If «pure taste» entailed «a refusal of 'impure' taste and of *aisthesis* (sensation), the simple, primitive form of pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses» (Bourdieu 2010, p. 488), the affirmation of popular forms of entertainment and cultural production raised more forcefully the question of the function fulfilled by disgust – i.e., the refusal of facile, cheap and coarse objects – in distinguishing proper from improper artworks.

Victorian culture proved to be an important arena for reconsidering the Kantian notion of disgust. Still upheld by orthodox critics, the stigmatisation of what was crude and vulgar in art nonetheless became an object of contention among intellectuals, who strove to negotiate fresh notions of beauty and enjoyment. Abundant evidence of this theoretical ferment can be found in the main artistic medium of the age: literature. While betraying a deep fascination for impure styles and motifs, Victorian literary works bear witness to the central role that British intellectuals came to play in the nineteenth-century redefinition of what deserved aesthetic legitimation.

As the articles collected in this issue demonstrate, the Victorians contributed to this process of aesthetic reconsideration in two important ways. On the one hand, they laid the foundations for an «impure aesthetics» that was to be developed in the twentieth century – one which, in Grady's words, was «primarily a product of 'Western Marxism', above all of Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno», who saw the aesthetic both «as an autonomous practice» and as «a social construct» that «participates in the market economy, the social-status system, the political world, the religious communities, and private life» (Grady 2009, pp. 21-22). On the other, Victorian literati were captivated by impure notions which, no longer viewed as mere sources of disgust, became an essential part of their aesthetic experience. The pleasure they took in representing «big, complicated, messy worlds» (Arac 2011, p. viii), their use of vulgar images and their violation of codified stylistic norms confirm their penchant for an aestheticisation of the impure.

By attaching new values to the dichotomy purity/impurity, the Victorians anticipated some theories developed by twentieth-century anthropologists

2 Suffice it to consider some implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking which, in E.F. Carritt's words, suggests that «art should not aim at 'beauty' – that is at making us rest in contemplation of the expressive image – but should issue immediately in an emotion directed to practical ends: the work of art should not be attended for its own sake but should secretly stimulate our behaviour» (Carritt 1962, p. 101).

and philosophers, who would analyse the socio-cultural meanings acquired by this dichotomy in the never-ending negotiation between sameness and heterogeneity, conservation and innovation. Notable, among these theories, is Mary Douglas's association of purity with the human tendency to preserve order and regularity against anomie: «Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise» (Douglas 2002, p. 200). Yet, as Douglas herself clarifies, the immobility of purity ultimately proves a deadly factor, while creativity and vitality pertain to the dynamic sphere of impurity. A similar drive to perversion pertains to the «abject» conceptualised by Julia Kristeva, which mobilises the system by corrupting rules and dissolving boundaries. «[T]he artistic experience [...] is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies», claims Kristeva, who sees the history of art as a dynamic process of contamination and catharsis (Kristeva 1982, p. 17). If applied to the Victorian artistic experience, these ideas suggest that, after a phase dominated by Kantian aesthetic and by ossified neoclassical norms, artists came to perceive impurity as a regenerative element which could counteract the immobility of homogeneising models of refinement and beauty.

Hardly conceivable in rational terms, the impure is generally associated with mysteries and primeval energies that escape human comprehension (Marroni 2007, p. 40). This tendency is evident in Victorian culture which complicates, rather than solves, some aporias of eighteenth-century aesthetics. A case in point is its declination of the idea of sublimity, which gives proof of the age's taste for merging opposites together, such as ugliness with beauty, delight with pain. Neatly differentiated from pure beauty by Kant, but already viewed in terms of impure pleasure by Edmund Burke, the sublime became in fact an elusive concept in the course of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century it was notably defined as «a species, instead of the antithesis, of beauty» by A.C. Bradley, whose ideas had clear transgressive implications: «The pleasure we take in sublimity, instead of being immediate, purely affirmative, as is that of beauty, is conditioned by a previous negative stage of repulsion in which we feel 'checked, baffled, menaced'» (Carritt 1962, p. 156).

In ways similar to the sublime, effects of repulsion/attraction are recurrently evoked in the literature of the age, most notably in popular novels, whose images of violence and gross corporeality excite morbid pleasures. By associating residues of the bodily and the repressed with aesthetic categories, moreover, the Victorians raised the question of art's powers of *mimesis*. Amply discussed and practised at the time, literary realism became an object of controversy for nineteenth-century writers and critics, who strove to determine its limits and aesthetic value. At stake was an issue that would be explicitly addressed by twentieth-century theorists: whether art should be imaginary and destined to produce disinterested pleasure, or whether it could be contaminated by repressed desires cir-

culating within the social sphere. By experimenting with various degrees of realism, Victorian writers challenged the former assumption and paved the way for a more flexible idea of what constituted proper representation. Their widening of aesthetic categories was favoured by a literary practice largely adopted at the time: the constant merging of subgenres, discourses and methods of representation, which enabled realism to penetrate into non-realistic forms, thereby making it difficult to identify and preserve pure literary forms.

As hinted above, these changes were accelerated by the rapid expansion of the nineteenth-century literary market which, especially in Britain, altered intellectual labour, together with consumer attitudes and tastes. As a consequence, the Victorians witnessed a blurring of the opposition between «free art» and «mercenary art» established by Kant, with an inevitable reduction of the autonomy, purity and freedom of intellectual creativity (Meredith 1952, p. 164).

The extent to which the literature of the age responded to this process of refocalisation deserves critical attention. Particularly noteworthy is the Victorian aestheticising approach to the idea of impurity, which demands to be more closely investigated in the various forms it took within a dynamic, heterogeneous literary production.

Such an objective is pursued by the authors of the thirteen articles collected in this issue, which investigate different aspects of the process of aesthetic redefinition activated by Victorian writers. While drawing on established methodology, each article offers glimpses into particular meanings attached to the word «impurity», as well as into the aesthetic connotations the word acquired in relevant writings of the time. The order in which the contributions are arranged, moreover, sheds light onto the complex evolution of motifs, genres and ideas, which marks the distinction of nineteenth-century British literature.

A wide-ranging survey of the long nineteenth century is offered by Francesca Orestano, who demonstrates that Victorian culture was a crucial hinge in the development of modern aesthetics. Besides focusing on new criteria emerging at the time, Orestano describes the age's tendency towards the dissolution of objective standards of beauty and the consequent rethinking of eighteenth-century ideas in relation to the changing system of cultural production: «The purity of art and the purity of taste are notions that have to be readjusted within the present context: the notion of taste not silenced, but made subservient, with a blessing, to economic interests triggered by the technology of mechanical reproduction». The article not only examines some implications of the connection between art, trade and scientific progress; it also suggests that chemistry came to symbolise the paradigm pure/impure both in Victorian literature and art criticism. A science intrinsically impure in its objective (as a study of the infinite combination of elements), chemistry acquired epistemic relevance

in the course of the nineteenth century and was used, among other things, to render «those mixed elements – whether in history, art, or aesthetics – that react one upon each other, producing new substances». Taste itself and the appreciation of beauty were insistently represented through this overarching metaphor. A nonfictional example of its recurrence can be found in Walter Pater's «Preface» to *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877), which establishes an effective parallel between the work of the chemist and the passionate response of the aesthetic critic.

Not differently from Orestano, Andrew Mangham and Silvana Colella explore the intermingling of art (and literature) with other spheres and fields of knowledge. The central concern of Mangham's article is the influence that medical statistics exerted on the narrativisation of hunger in a century dominated by the grim realities of poverty and starvation. Based as it was on facts and figures, this scientific discipline risked to reduce all stories of suffering «to a clipped and unrepresentative number». Sensitive scientists such as statistician William Farr saw this danger and strove to negotiate a new balance between sympathy and scientific observation. In the 1830s-40s, Farr drew inspiration from the oral tradition to describe the tragedies of the starving. The emotional responses produced by his medical writings counteracted the dispassionate empiricism of science, thereby inaugurating an impure aesthetic that was to play a central role in the Social Problem Novel. Unsurprisingly, Mangham detects important convergences between Farr's medico-narrativisation of hunger and the novelistic representation of this social affliction offered by Charles Kingsley one decade later: «Like the writings of William Farr, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* was a response to the perceived statistical tendency towards the simplification of starvation».

Another source of impurity in Victorian culture was the cross-fertilisation between aesthetic and commercial interests, which Colella explores in relation to Walter Bagehot's literary essays. Besides making a case for the re-evaluation of Bagehot's understudied writings, the article asserts the importance of his contribution to «the cultivation of an impure critical stance» as well as to «the orientation of the cultural tastes of the middle classes». As Colella contends, Bagehot's «critical perspective was predicated not on an elitist form of detachment from the unrefined, materialistic or even vulgar philosophies of the commercial classes, but on a kind of empathic and respectful proximity to the practicalities that affected the life of the 'transacting and trading multitude'». Especially relevant was his exaltation of *vita activa*, a basic tenet of the trading community culture to which he belonged. Thanks to his personal experience of the world of business, Bagehot developed views that stood in sharp contrast with the convictions of the Victorian champions of purity. His essays bear evidence of his critique of models of aloofness and abstraction exalted by early century theorists, as well as of his mistrust of the cultural elitism theorised by Matthew Arnold a few years later.

Remarkably present in the age's nonfictional production, the Victorian responses to pressing aesthetic dilemmas are most conspicuous in the mid-century novel, a genre that became a main forum for intellectual debate. The periodical press in which many novels were serialised proved to be a fundamental medium of circulation of new ideas of taste and art. Most important, in this regard, were the experiments conducted by best-selling novelists such as Charles Dickens and the representatives of the 'sensation school'. The impure motifs and hybrid style of their narratives generated discussions over the aesthetic legitimation of artworks which patently violated norms upheld by the high culture tradition. What is noteworthy, however, is that these discussions not only led to the social stigmatisation of novelists. They also favoured a transformation of the very tastes and principles of the Victorian middle classes, who gradually developed an appetite for impure narratives labelled as vulgar in the orthodox press.

The innovative function fulfilled by the mid-century novel is dealt with in three articles which explore the relation between this genre and the Victorian rethinking of aesthetic criteria. In «Fact and Taste: Thematic and Metaliterary Impurity in *Hard Times*», Saverio Tomaiuolo develops an idea that is central to the tradition of Dickens criticism: that *Hard Times* «provides an interesting access to a creative internal struggle experienced by Dickens» in an important phase of his artistic career. Through a multi-levelled reading of the novel, Tomaiuolo demonstrates that, more than other Dickens works, *Hard Times* raises concerns about literary representation and professionalism which were haunting its author in the 1850s. In addition to confirming the Dickensian oscillation between hardly reconcilable opposites, such as unbridled creativity and down-to-earth factuality, this novel pivots around an idea of impurity that takes manifold textual shapes. A narrative that disturbingly juxtaposes fancy with fact, the carnivalesque with the grim reality of industrialism, *Hard Times* simultaneously challenges formalism with its «hybrid assemblage of contrasting styles», thereby suggesting the complexity of the author's reflection on the limits and values of literary representation.

Another proof of Dickens's unorthodox interests was his taste for corpses displayed to public gaze – a taste he shared with sensation novelists like Wilkie Collins. The manifestation of this impure taste in some mid-century novels is analysed by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, who comes to two important conclusions: that Victorian popular novels embodied and recorded cultural responses to medical science, particularly to bodies exhibited in anatomical museums; and that fictional representations of this morbid anatomy «offer insights into definitions of popular literature and popular taste». While proving the centrality acquired by the «anatomical gaze» in mid-Victorian literature, Talairach-Vielmas investigates the historical sources of this gaze, including medical shows and exhibitions that were targeted as offensive and potentially depraving. These critiques were



strongly evocative of those levied against the sensation novel which, in the same period, was «frequently condemned for breeding forms of impure taste in the readers». Such convergences are palpable in Collins's *Armada*, a sensation novel that capitalises on morbid tastes associated with medical science. As Talairach-Vielmas argues, *Armada* betokens a new type of realism which, quite graphic in its details, was anchored within a culture of exhibition that spectacularised the body. Strongly influenced by Victorian medicine, this culture was intertwined with the development of sensational realism – a mode of composition «aligned with exposure, exhibition and opening, terms which are reminiscent of the world of anatomy and surgical skill».

The emphasis laid on physicality was undoubtedly a peculiarity of mid-Victorian sensationalism. Further reflections on this topic are offered by Anne-Marie Beller in a study of the revisions Mary Elizabeth Braddon made to her penny serial *The Outcasts* before its publication in three volumes as *Henry Dunbar*. As Beller contends, the sensation genre lacked the necessary distance from the corporeal that defined pure taste and was «frequently criticised for its insistent corporeality and unwholesome depictions of physical violence and sensuality». Its impurity was made more offensive by the class identity of its target audience which, primarily bourgeois, was encouraged to develop a taste for violence and sensuality that had much in common with the lower-class appetites of penny-novel readers. For these reasons, the rise of sensationalism posed the problem of reconsidering aesthetic principles in relation to the habitus of social groups (Bourdieu 2010, pp. 166-168). How marked was the 'classed' nature of genres at the time? And to what extent did the new genre contribute to the vulgarisation of middle-class tastes? After describing Braddon's efforts to reduce the proliferation of bodies in *Henry Dunbar*, Beller comes to an interesting conclusion: «Braddon's revision of her penny serial into a circulating novel for the middle classes illustrates that the key difference between the two classed genres was largely cosmetic rather than a matter of intrinsically divergent tastes». Such a view is confirmed by the mixed reception of *Henry Dunbar* by middle-class critics, some of whom strikingly seemed to appreciate the more violent version destined to the penny-novel market.

The impassioned debate around the sensation genre revealed the complexity of literary discourse in a crucial period of transition for the novel. As proved by the strong responses of their opponents, sensationalists called into question the divide between high and low culture, as well as the classed nature of established forms of literature. The questions they raised not only influenced the theorisation and practice of the novel; they also had an impact on other literary genres developed in the second half of the century. Poetry itself bears evidence of this theoretical ebullience. In «'Sensational nonsense': Edward Lear and the (Im)purity of Nonsense



Writing», Raffaella Antinucci examines Lear's poetic production in light of the objections he raised to the literary use of sensation, despite his life-long friendship with Collins. Still, there are, in Lear's poetry, elements that evoke the impure quality of sensation literature, such as the fetishisation of the body, the recurrence of violent images, and the «pervasive cross-fertilisation of literary forms and themes». Antinucci delves deep into these contradictions to demonstrate that Lear engaged with both sides of the cultural divide. While using high literary conventions that appealed to a sophisticated audience, he in fact resorted to trivial subjects that were supposed to gratify lower-class tastes. For all these reasons, many of his poems betray an undecidability that has something in common with the renegotiation of Victorian cultural canons triggered by Collins and his fellow novelists: «Lear's nonsense ultimately elicits an aesthetic response that, in Kantian terms, is reflective and sensual, pure and impure, rational and sensational, at the same time».

Apart from Lear, other Victorian poets appropriated and reinterpreted views of the beautiful and the artistic that circulated within their cultural milieu. An interesting case is taken into account by Jude V. Nixon, who discusses the fragmentary impulse recurrent in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry. As he argues in «Hopkins's Poetic Porcupines and the Aesthetic Taste», most unfinished works of the Jesuit poet have been viewed as aesthetically displeasing by critics, who have ignored two important facts: that Hopkins wrote fragmentarily and theorised on the imperfect; and that some poems fretfully classified as incomplete were, instead, intentionally planned to suggest irresolution. The poem «St. Thecla», among others, testifies to Hopkins's creation of «poetic porcupines, miniature works of art severed and isolated from the larger whole, but entirely self-contained and unfinished in their completion». In order to appreciate such formalistic complexities, this and other 'fragments' should be read in light of the Romantic tradition, as well as of seminal aesthetic notions of perfection developed by Kant, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schiller. Besides revealing Hopkins's «contribution to the Romantic poetic fragment as a form that can inspire aesthetic emotions», the approach adopted by Nixon unveils meaningful convergences with earlier philosophical ideas, including Schlegel's conceptualisation of the beauty of the fragment, and Schiller's view of the moral as the foundation of grace and beauty.

The Victorian elaboration of the Romantic legacy is also taken into consideration by Roger Ebbatson, who compares «the function and effect of the aesthetic gaze in a group of 'mirror' poems, focusing upon issues of representation and the male gaze». A symbol that recurs in the Romantic theorisation of the mimetic in art, the mirror reappears in a number of Victorian poems, in which it acquires a variety of erotic and artistic meanings. In particular, Ebbatson's analysis focuses on the declination of the mirror symbolism in the works of two poets: Algernon Charles Swinburne's

«Before the Mirror», a supplementary text inspired by a Whistler painting, and three late-Victorian poems composed by Thomas Hardy. By drawing on philosophical and psychoanalytic theories, Ebbatson highlights significant differences between the two poets' use of the mirror as a generator of projections of the self and of various forms of desire. His conclusion is that the mirror's reflexivity came to embody the two poets' divergent views of art. More specifically, for Swinburne the work of art functioned as «a non-mimetic or purely formal object, one determined by traditional canons of beauty» which were to acquire new centrality in fin-de-siècle symbolism. Unlike him, Hardy willingly embraced «the 'impure aesthetic' of artistic realism» and used his mirror imagery to articulate a more radical response to the decline of folklore culture.

The last group of articles bring the attention back to fiction. Under scrutiny here is the late-Victorian evolution of long and short fiction from the 1870s to the fin de siècle, a period in which mid-Victorian issues mingled with new aesthetic preoccupations. In «Impure Researches, or Literature, Marketing and Aesthesis: The Case of Ouida's 'A Dog of Flanders' (1871-Today)», Andrew King reflects on how the publishing market contaminated reader responses to literary texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cogent proof of this contamination can be found in the effects that marketing decisions had on the material format and the reception of «A Dog of Flanders». Initially conceived as a narrative for adults, this short story by Ouida was successively repackaged as children's story, art-book designed as gift, and animal-rights protest tale. In exploring the various stages of this transformation, which also affected the books' paratextual components (including cover images), King copes with two main methodological questions. First, he asserts that the aesthetic desire for a product such as Ouida's story should not be interpreted in terms of Kantian disinterestedness, but should rather be viewed as necessarily impure, owing to the lure exerted by the physicality of the desired object. Secondly, he underlines the importance of conducting «impure researches». Based as they are on the recognition that «a text is, to our reading bodies, the ever increasing sum of the history of its sensuous presentation and perception», these researches pay attention to the materiality of texts, thus protecting us from the danger of depriving a literary work of its afterlives.

A different interpretation of the necessity of impurity is given by Maria Luisa De Rinaldis in a reading of two short stories composed by Pater in the 1880s-90s. After clarifying that Pater's aesthetic views were shaped by a dual tension between the pure and the impure, De Rinaldis explores the ways in which this duality affected «his understanding of the category of the sacred, in line with contemporary anthropological thought». The 'imaginary portraits' drawn in «Denys l'Auxerrois» and «Gaudioso, the Second» well render the author's wish to project the impure into the domain of sacredness and, in so doing, to make it signify regeneration. This

semantic reconfiguration is evident in the itinerary of degeneration and sacrifice followed by Denys, as well as in Gaudioso's contamination with «inert impure material» which «gives solidity to the sanctity and purity of life». «A beauty which is untouched by impurity is sterile», observes De Rinaldis, before concluding that the Paterian re-orientation of the sacred towards the human anticipates twentieth-century aesthetics, including some ideas upheld by Adorno and Giorgio Agamben.

Distinctively crude and perverse is, instead, the notion of impurity at the core of Arthur Machen's works, which dramatise pressing fin-de-siècle anxieties. As Gilles Menegaldo asserts, in his reading of *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors*, Machen created hybrid texts that pivot around this notion both stylistically and thematically. Alongside «a certain form of impurity» resulting from the combination of «various genre conventions at time verging upon parody or pastiche», the two narratives exhibit motifs and images that are meant to «generate a strong feeling of fascination mingled with a sense of horror and abjection». This predilection for gothic, lurid details is best visible in Machen's depictions of the city as a labyrinthine space «fraught with uncanny connotations», and in his predilection for corporeal images evocative of ugliness, violence and repulsive metamorphosis. By turning the body into a generator of pleasure inextricably combined with disgust, the Welsh writer contributed to freeing literature from the constraints of pure, formalistic representations of beauty, thereby adding a further element of modernisation to the sensation novel legacy. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Machen's association of the corporeal with a hyper-connoted idea of impurity foregrounds the Kristevan conceptualisation of the «abject» as an element of disturbance of purity and order, something that «does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite» (Kristeva 1982, p. 4).

Together with fiction, drama was strongly influenced by an impure taste which, particularly at the fin de siècle, drew nourishment from the fast spreading consumer culture. The aesthetic implications of this cross-generic exchange are best noticeable in Oscar Wilde's production of the 1880s-90s, which offers thought-provoking clues to the complex interaction he established with the dominant culture of his age. In «Consumerism, Celebrity Culture and the Aesthetic Impure in Oscar Wilde», Pierpaolo Martino examines some ambiguities of the aesthetic credo held by the Anglo-Irish author, who «seemed to embrace opposite and irreconcilable approaches to consumerism». Already evident in his American lectures, which consecrated his celebrity cult, the difficulty of harmonising high art with low culture, the love of beauty with materialistic desires, continued to characterise Wilde's artistic views in the 1890s, as evidenced by many contradictions inherent in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his famous plays. Still, as Martino argues, it was exactly by dithering over irreconcilable positions that Wilde came to play a countercultural, innova-

tive function within his milieu. The «first proper celebrity of the modern age», he developed views that were to exercise a powerful influence on the following century, and would shape our own perception of fashion, style and the beautiful. «Wilde's impure aesthetics seems to be one of the most relevant legacies of late Victorian culture, to which postmodernity itself – as we have come to know it, with its 'taste' for bricolage and the mixture of high and low cultures – is heavily indebted».

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## The Chemistry of Taste

### Aesthetics, Literature, and the Rise of the Impure

Francesca Orestano

(Università degli Studi di Milano, Italia)

**Abstract** The article explores the evolution of the discourse of taste during the XVIII and XIX centuries, adopting the categories of pure and impure as paradigmatic keys to the subject. Reynolds' standards of aesthetic judgement, and the voices of Hogarth and Richard Payne Knight, mark the drive towards taste as subjective response. Thus young Marianne Dashwood can judge whether Edward Ferrars' taste is pure or impure. Taste, despite Hazlitt's warnings, becomes synonymous with fashion, and fashion is an impure element, conditioned by new technologies, allowing the manufacture of endless replicas from original art works. The Great Exhibition is the pivotal event that consecrates the productions of industry, commerce and art. Such triangulation thrives on the scientific progress of chemistry, which presides over the offer of new materials, colours, printing techniques, Parian marble, electroplated metal, allowing all kinds of cheap imitations. John Ruskin comments upon the triumphant progress of chemistry: and often uses analogies or metaphors taken from this science in order to explain the obscure processes of the artist's associative imagination. Purity of taste – or its impure connections with chemical works and their products – are discussed by Ruskin. But the paradigm pure/impure is also relevant to the work of Victorian art critics. Walter Pater and Vernon Lee recur to chemistry in order to explain the mysteries of the subjective response to art. Writers follow, such as Collins and Stevenson, who weld the strange mixture of pure and impure elements in human nature to chemistry, and thus place on the epistemic horizon of this science the fundamental questions of their age.

**Summary** 1 Taste: the Early Debate. – 2 Debating Taste in the Age of Aesthetic Democracy. – 3 Taste and Modern Science. – 4 The Chemistry of Taste, Industry and Aesthetic Judgement. – 5 Pure/Impure in the Laboratory of Literature

**Keywords** Aesthetics. Chemistry. Narration. Taste.

## 1 Taste: the Early Debate

In order to broach the subject of taste in the nineteenth century, and to analyse it within the paradigmatic notions of purity and impurity, I suggest as a preliminary survey *Il Gusto: Storia di una idea estetica* (Russo 2000), where the essays of Sertoli (2000, pp. 79-125) and Franzini (2000, pp. 183-202) respectively clarify the initial debate on taste and its «ending» or «dissolution» in the age of mechanical reproduction.

During the eighteenth century we witness the gradual undoing of the



objective standards of taste inherited from the classicist tradition, which endowed an object with substantial artistic quality. The process starts with Addison, who sees aesthetic value as shorn of moral implications, while the emphasis is set on the experience of fruition, indeed on Mr. Spectator (Sertoli 2000, p. 83). Subsequently, albeit for different reasons, Hogarth and Burke argue against the sweeping tide of subjectivism in matters of taste. William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), subtitled *Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste*, reads as a bold argument in favour of the line of beauty. Beauty is not only the prerogative of finished art works kept in Italian churches and museums, but has to be discerned in the serpentine lines of pineapples, in scroll legs tables and curly wigs. In addition to his main thesis, Hogarth provides his readers with superb etchings, where famous statues from classical antiquity stand side by side with the shape of a bell, a candlestick, a tulip, a cyclamen (as in: William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* [1753], plate 1).

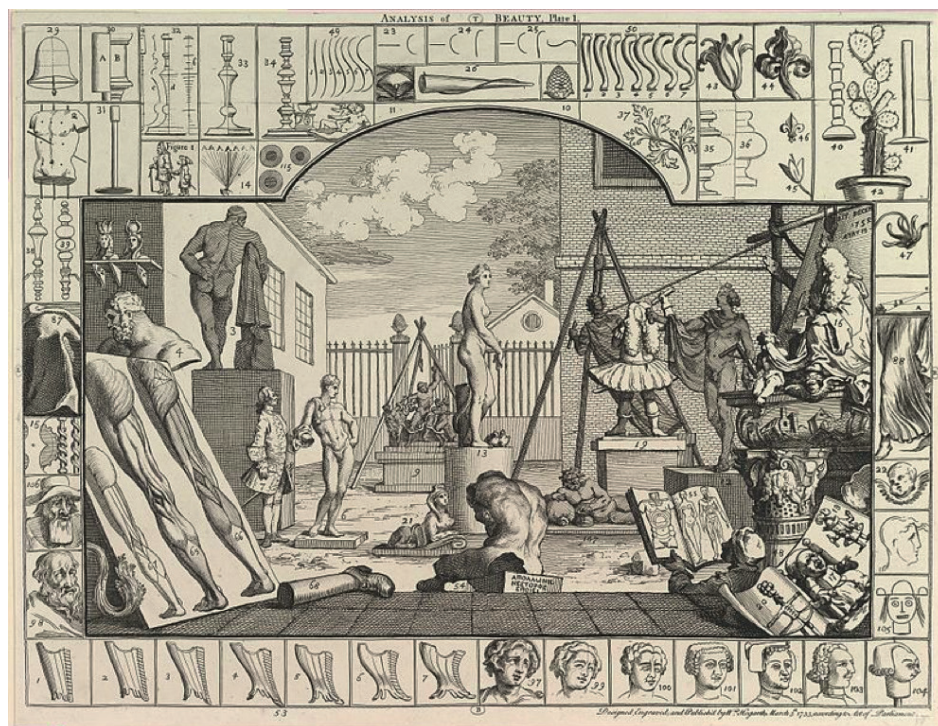


Figure 1. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753. Plate 1

In this context, the religious portrait of the Madonna, tempting the monk Ambrosius in the eponymous novel by Matthew Lewis (1796), indirectly confirms Hogarth's emphasis on the purity of formal beauty, and on the moral infection – «Away, impure ideas!» (Anderson 1980, p. 41) the monk exclaims – that results from a degeneration of taste.

Beauty resides – and Burke's position is even more radical, according to Sertoli (2000, p. 96) – in some material, objective qualities which, nevertheless, affect the mind. The dissolution of the objective standard of beauty will be accomplished by the philosophy of associations. From the pulpit of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds champions the category of ideal beauty by remarking «all arts have means within them of applying themselves with success both to the intellectual and sensitive part of our natures» (Rogers 1992, p. 188). As a consequence he states that

The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it. As this principle is observed or neglected, our profession becomes either a liberal art, or a mechanical trade. In the hands of one man it makes the highest pretensions, as it is addressed to the noblest faculties: in those of another it is reduced to a mere matter of ornament; and the painter has but the humble province of furnishing our apartments with elegance. (p. 116)

Thus, in Reynolds's *Discourse III*, the Grand Style, with the religious subjects ideally interpreted by the Great Italian Masters, is set above the Ornamental, and both are above the Composite Style, formed on local customs – on realism. Not only the subject, from highest to lowest, but also the idea of mechanic repetition is conceived by Reynolds as gradually depriving the original masterpiece of its purity and beauty. A mechanical trade – and this notion will be even more relevant in the following century – produces ornamental copies out of one noble original – and owing to their sheer numbers, copies have a fragmented, diminished value. In the same *Discourse* Reynolds remarks that Hogarth applies his genius «to low and vulgar characters» (p. 113): excellence in the visual arts, and painting, is only conferred by the hand and genius of the master, and the original product is to be set above the copy and the mechanical skill of imitation. While Hogarth already deploys the means of technological reproduction afforded by his etchings to promote his idea of visual beauty, Reynolds maintains that only his cluster of rules and highly moral subjects can fix the standard of excellence in the arts. Taste is the prerogative of the man of taste, and towards the end of the century the notion of «fine taste» undergoes the democratization implied by the concept of «common standard of taste» and by self-appointed connoisseurs (Sertoli 2000, p. 114; Orestano 2012a).

Reynolds's system of evaluation, with its neat hierarchy of beauty and artistic value, offering a safe pathway between the ideal purity of the Great

Italian Masters and the vulgarity of low modern subjects – Dutch inns with inebriated peasants and fruit baskets – is gradually undermined by the philosophy of associations. The relevant text is Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), defined by Sertoli as the «terminal case» in that long debate toward the erasure of all objectivity in aesthetic judgement, ending up, eventually, in the narcissistic play of the subjective imagination (Sertoli 2000, pp. 104-105). After Alison, Richard Payne Knight in *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805) deploys his connoisseurship to discuss the «simple purity» of the classics. Impurity would taint the very champions of sculptural style:

Both Michel Angelo and Bernini were enthusiastic in their admiration [...] of the Grecian style of sculpture; but nevertheless Michel Angelo and Bernini were, in opposite ways, the great corruptors of pure style; the one having expanded it into the monstrous and extravagant, and the other sunk it into effeminacy and affectation. (Knight 1808, p. 6)

Knight's inquiry makes clear that beauty does not stand on absolute rules, but on the beholder's perception: and here the category of taste confines aesthetic discourse, soon to become the chosen subject of conversations spanning from high art to furniture and current fashion. In this phase of the history of culture, taste accommodates the requirements of a middle class, which, according to Bourdieu (1987), seeks to achieve the distinction of a higher social milieu. Knight remarks: «All refinement of taste, in the liberal arts, arises, in the first instance, on this faculty of improved perception» (Knight 1808, p. 100). Association of ideas is what enhances taste, through a comparative assessment of beauty. Again, it is a question of class and wealth, of connoisseurship, in the end:

Much of the pleasure, which we receive from painting, sculpture, music, poetry, &c. arises from our associating other ideas with those immediately excited by them. Hence the productions of these arts are never thoroughly enjoyed but by persons, whose minds are enriched by a variety of kindred and corresponding imagery. (p. 145)

Consequently, the judge in matters of taste rises to unprecedented importance: defined as the 'connoisseur', he – a man of wealth, a collector, a Grand Tourist – has to discern between the purity of genuine originals, and the impure copies. By a sad trick of destiny, the same Richard Payne Knight, who in *Specimens of Antient Sculpture* (1809) had destroyed the reputation of many ancient statues by arguing that they were inferior Roman copies of Greek originals, will dramatically express a wrong judgment about the Elgin Marbles, bought in 1816 at a very high price – £35,000 – and then treasured at the British Museum. The Elgin marbles controversy



would enlist against Knight, dubbed 'the arrogant connoisseur' (Clarke; Penny 1982), the pens of Benjamin Robert Haydon and William Hazlitt.

Sertoli's essay closes the trajectory of the eighteenth-century debate on taste with Richard Payne Knight, and with the notion that taste is a phenomenon depending on historico-social circumstances. After Knight, the Romantic deluge. Franzini reminds us of the dissolution of taste (Franzini 2000, p. 191), when the Romantic pre-eminence given to genius as depository of the truth of art, and the power exerted by sheer subjectivity over art production, jointly determine the historical decadence of the standards of taste. The social evolution of artistic genres, the plurality of the languages of art, and the parallel evolution in the public modify the notion of taste, which does no longer dwell at the centre of the aesthetic horizon, like a golden segment, but is affected by contemporary fashion and modernity, by economics and physiology (p. 193).

To trace the last steps of this dissolution, I suggest to focus on Richard Payne Knight's «Sceptical View of the Subject», where despite the fact that «the superiority» of «pure and faultless models has been invariably recognized by all», the author acknowledges that modern practices and professions, physiology and natural inclinations, plus the sensations conveyed by the organs of taste, are the factors to be considered when attempting the analysis of taste, that is «equally unconnected with, and uninfluenced by, the higher faculties of the mind» (Knight 1808, pp. 5-18). It is thus appropriate as well as immensely ironic of Jane Austen to attribute the faculty of improved perception to an impetuous, ignorant, provincial and dangerously romantic young woman, who is neither a wealthy collector, nor a Grand Tourist – nor indeed 'the man of taste' of well-trained, impeccable judgement.

In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) Marianne Dashwood remarks to her sister: «What a pity it is, Elinor, [...] that Edward should have no taste for drawing» (Tanner 1974, p. 53). Elinor's defense is that Edward's opinions indicate that «his observation is just and correct, his taste delicate and pure» (p. 54). Austen's genial spoof on connoisseurship does not spare Willoughby's preference for a romantic cottage with dark narrow stairs, and a kitchen that smokes, in preference to a modern, clean, comfortable home. And the reader is even taught in a few sentences a few useful notions about the taste for the picturesque in art and gardening, with the dangers attending those who apply the principles of picturesque beauty – decay, nettles, and ruins – to a fine prospect (pp. 121-122). Here are the first ironic hints of the coming landslide of taste. Marianne's portrait is the masterful, gendered caricature of the eighteenth-century connoisseur.

## 2 Debating Taste in the Age of Aesthetic Democracy

Fashion is sweeping away golden rules and lines of beauty alike, and William Hazlitt, after pronouncing his faith in the perfection of high art in «Fragments on Art. Why the Arts Are Not Progressive?» (1814), offers a full view of the situation in his essay «Whether the Fine Arts Are promoted by Academies» (1814). In his age, he argues, connoisseurship has become a fashion, and the artist is judged by «pretenders to taste, through vanity, affectation, and idleness» (Cook 1991, p. 262).

The purity or liberality of professional decisions cannot [...] be expected to counteract the tendency which an appeal to the public has to lower the standard of taste. [...] Common sense, which has been sometimes appealed to as the criterion of taste, is nothing but the common capacity, applied to common facts and feelings; [...] but does not every ignorant connoisseur pretend the same veneration, and talk with the same vapid assurance of Michel Angelo, though he has never seen even a copy of any of his pictures [...]? (pp. 265-266)

Against the rising tide of the vulgarization of art, which Linda Dowling describes as «aesthetic democracy» (Dowling 1996), against the cultural hunger for images which hatches scores of academies, and a legion of artists and would-be judges, who will rule the Victorian market, Hazlitt could only complain that «The principle of universal suffrage, however applicable to matters of government, [...] is by no means applicable to matters of taste» (Cook 1991, p. 263). Self-appointed connoisseurs judge in matters of art, according to principles set by the fashion of the moment. And in his 1818 essay «On Fashion» Hazlitt remarks:

[Fashion] is the perpetual setting up and disowning a certain standard of taste, elegance and refinement, which has no other foundation or authority than that it is the prevailing distinction of the moment, which was yesterday ridiculous from its being new, and to-morrow will be odious from its being common. (p. 149)

Fashion, according to Hazlitt, is superficial, frivolous, haughty, trifling, affected, servile, despotic, mean, ambitious, «tied to no rule, and bound to conform to every whim of the minute» (p. 150). After this violent tirade, we read that in England old distinctions are collapsing as «the ideas of natural equality and the Manchester steam-engines have, like a double battery, levelled the high towers [...] of fashion» (p. 150). Thus purity of taste is no longer an impregnable category vivified by high art, but an element within the volatile circus of modern fashion: and from the purity of art, by easy descent, Hazlitt assesses the purity of women.

A distinct counter-reformation attitude marks Hazlitt's cry for purity, his modern anathema:

The only difference between the woman of fashion and the woman of pleasure is, that the one *is* what the other *only seems to be*; and yet, the victims of dissipation who thus rival and almost outshine women of the first quality in all the blaze, and pride, and glitter of shew and fashion, are, in general, no better than a set of raw, uneducated, inexperienced country girls or awkward, coarse-fisted servant maids. (pp. 153-154)

Women and fashion are not the only target: it looks as if between women and art there existed a divide, according to Hazlitt, which is made even more dramatic by the present confusion in gender roles: «Obscenity, irreligion, small oaths, tippling, gaming, effeminacy in one sex and Amazon airs in the other, any thing is the fashion while it lasts» (p. 151). The critic here is invoking clear-cut distinctions, and warning his age against dangerous mixtures of incompatible elements.<sup>1</sup> He remarks that «the two nearest things in the world are gentility and vulgarity» (p. 154), a fact which may lead society to moral confusion, and self-destruction (Marroni 2002) – and indeed to a very confusing notion of taste.

A few years later, John Ruskin – a young and articulate critic, bent on reforming what he perceives as moral corruption –, while promoting the art of his favourite painter, J.M.W. Turner, and silencing the intimidating voice of Sir Joshua Reynolds, will venture on the subject (Orestano 2000 and 2009). With a typical odd mixture of Romantic pragmatism, Evangelical rhetoric, and sweeping statements, Ruskin sets out to define the notion of taste in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843). This is not indeed his first attempt (Orestano 2000 and 2012b); but his attitude is one easily leading to the aporias marking his long career and his work as a critic – not only in matters of art. In the early 1840s, he defines taste as the result of a moral condition. The man who follows the «natural laws of aversion and desire» so as to derive pleasure always «from that which God originally intended should give him pleasure [...] is the man of taste» (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 3, pp. 109-110).

This, then, is the real meaning of this disputed word. Perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its pu-

<sup>1</sup> According to Hazlitt in «On the Elgin Marbles» gender and art are incompatible: «What then, are we, [...] to confound the difference of sex in a sort of hermaphrodite softness, as [...] Angelica Kauffman, and others, have done in their effeminate performances?» (Cook 1991, pp. 278-279).

rity and perfection. He who receives little pleasure from these sources, wants taste; he who receives pleasure from any other sources, has false or bad taste.

And it is thus that the term «taste» is to be distinguished from that of «judgment», with which it is constantly confounded. Judgment is a general term, expressing definite action of the intellect, and applicable to every kind of subject which can be submitted to it. There may be judgment of congruity, judgment of truth, judgment of justice, and judgment of difficulty and excellence. But all these exertions of the intellect are totally distinct from taste, properly so called, which is the instinctive and instant preferring of one material object to another without any obvious reason, except that it is proper to human nature in its perfection so to do. (vol. 3, p. 110)

In the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) the attempt to define taste will slide even deeper into a Romantic ontology tinged with stern Evangelical morality, producing his aesthetic sermons, which admonish his contemporaries against beauty becoming «the servant of lust» (vol. 4, p. 49). Taste is a faculty that only applies to the pure of heart (vol. 4, pp. 51-65). The notion of purity resurfaces again, in the Preface, with the support of the quote «Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double-minded» (vol. 4, p. 5). With these statements, the early battles of the first Reformation, fought over the impure images of superstitious Catholic art, seem to be revived again. When he concludes: «Our purity of taste, therefore, is best tested by its universality; for if we can only admire this thing or that, we may be sure that our cause for liking is of a finite and false nature» (vol. 4, p. 60), one may infer that for all his Romantic tension Ruskin aspires to a timeless horizon, of classical and religious nature.

Leaving his readers to mull the mysteries of taste, and the not-so-obvious reasons that connect its material sources in the present to our eternal moral nature, but nevertheless invoking the truth of art, of sky, of vegetation, of Turner's work, Ruskin finally confronts the problem and nature of public taste. Describing it as «a fitful and vacillating current of vague impression, perpetually liable to change, subject to epidemic desires, and agitated by infectious passion, the slave of fashion, and the fool of fancy» (vol. 3, p. 617), Ruskin echoes Hazlitt's statements, but he lacks the contact with the real press and the public which endowed Hazlitt's articles with vibrant first-hand knowledge. As usual, Ruskin preaches a very ambiguous truth: here stopping halfway between the evil responsibilities of public taste and the almost divining leadership the press should exert in matters of art.

Public taste may thus degrade a race of men capable of the highest efforts in art into the portrait painters of ephemeral fashions, but it will yet not fail of discovering who, among these portrait painters, is the

man of most mind [...]. Of course a thousand modifying circumstances interfere with the action of the general rule; [...]. The press, therefore, and all who pretend to lead the public taste, have not so much to direct the multitude whom to go to, as what to ask for. Their business is not to tell us which is our best painter, but to tell us whether we are making our best painter do his best. (vol. 3, pp. 617-618)

Hazlitt's considerations on matters of fashion did indeed suggest not only the impending danger of a confusing uniformity of fashion and taste, but also a blurring of all fine distinctions, of class and gender, which would consequently affect social relationships as well. If, on the one hand, taste is becoming a matter of fashion, rather than a standard fixed by art criticism and art production, on the other hand taste provides recipes that are essential to the mores of society, as a useful yardstick in contexts very far from high art and its masterpieces. And the context which seems increasingly closer to the sacred precincts of art, owing to the validation of taste, is industry.

Reynolds had given a clear hint about mechanical reproduction. In Hazlitt's essay «On the Elgin Marbles» (1822), the artist's imitation of ideal nature is extolled once again, because «The highest art, like nature, is a living spring of unconstrained excellence, and does not produce a continued repetition of itself, like plaster-casts from the same figure» (Cook 1991, p. 279). Hazlitt is pleading for uniqueness versus uniformity of repetition. His caveat against the plaster-casts will soon prove prophetic, but his voice will indeed be silenced by the loud drone of the Manchester steam-engines, and by the inevitable change they are to produce within the texture of Victorian society.

Ruskin, no less aware of the social changes described by Hazlitt, will focus on the issue of education as the means to teach the public to distinguish between good and bad, vulgar and noble, purist and profane: purity and impurity.

Wherever the word «taste» is used with respect to matters of art, it indicates either that the thing spoken of belongs to some inferior class of objects, or that the person speaking has a false conception of its nature. For, consider the exact sense in which a work of art is said to be «in good or bad taste». It does not mean that it is true, or false; that it is beautiful, or ugly; but that it does or does not comply either with the laws of choice, which are enforced by certain modes of life; or the habits of mind produced by a particular sort of education. It does not mean merely fashionable, that is, complying with a momentary caprice of the upper classes; but it means agreeing with the habitual sense which the most refined education, common to those upper classes at the period, gives to their whole mind. Now, therefore, so far as that education does

indeed tend to make the senses delicate, and the perceptions accurate, and thus enables people to be pleased with quiet instead of gaudy color, and with graceful instead of coarse form; and, by long acquaintance with the best things, to discern quickly what is fine from what is common; – so far, acquired taste is an honorable faculty, and it is true praise of anything to say it is «in good taste». But so far as this higher education has a tendency to narrow the sympathies and harden the heart, diminishing the interest of all beautiful things by familiarity, until even what is best can hardly please, and what is brightest hardly entertain; – so far as it fosters pride, and leads men to found the pleasure they take in anything, not on the worthiness of the thing, but on the degree in which it indicates some greatness of their own (as people build marble porticos, and inlay marble floors, not so much because they like the colors of marble, or find it pleasant to the foot, as because such porches and floors are costly, and separated in all human eyes from plain entrances of stone and timber); – so far as it leads people to prefer gracefulness of dress, manner, and aspect, to value of substance and heart, liking a well said thing better than a true thing, and a well trained manner better than a sincere one, and a delicately formed face better than a good-natured one, and in all other ways and things setting custom and semblance above everlasting truth; – so far, finally, as it induces a sense of inherent distinction between class and class, and causes everything to be more or less despised which has no social rank, so that the affection, pleasure, or grief of a clown are looked upon as of no interest compared with the affection and grief of a well-bred man; – just so far, in all these several ways, the feeling induced by what is called a «liberal education» is utterly adverse to the understanding of noble art; and the name which is given to the feeling, – Taste, Goût, Gusto, – in all languages, indicates the baseness of it, for it implies that art gives only a kind of pleasure analogous to that derived from eating by the palate. (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 5, pp. 94-96)

This long statement can be taken as encompassing the predicament of the whole century, inasmuch as it encapsulates contrasts of class and economics, fashion and education, beauty and religion. In the following paragraphs, the multiplication of coarse copies of art works, the commonest lithographs, the degradation of art, induce Ruskin to declare that he cannot pursue this inquiry. Ruskin's voice will move from art criticism and painting, toward an emphasis on form and structure (Orestano 2008); hence to architecture; hence again, from architecture to the social context producing it, and the cultural challenges discussed in *Unto His Last* (1860) and eventually in *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), his monthly *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*.

The purity of art and the purity of taste are notions that have to be

readjusted within the present context: the notion of taste not silenced, but made subservient, with a blessing, to economic interests triggered by the technology of mechanical reproduction. The age of common sense is indeed a common ground, filled with thousands of good copies, with numberless excellent reproductions in all styles and materials that offer to the public at a cheaper price what was formerly unique, valuable, and precious. Such abundance does not only affect the production process through which art replicas are offered to the public: in the literary field the proliferation of genres generates texts in which heterogeneous materials – epistolary, detective, journal, legal, travel book, commercial, medical report – combine, and compose new sensational narratives, fostered by new professional skills (Costantini 2015).

### 3 Taste and Modern Science

In his treasure book on *Victorian Things* (1988), Asa Briggs reminds us that the preoccupation with taste is evident in books such as *Hints on Household Taste* (1868) by Charles Lock Eastlake, and *A Plea for Art in the House* (1876) by W.J. Loftie. The connection between art and manufactures exists and thrives owing to scientific progress in chemistry: chemistry, and the technology derived from it, was «the creator of wealth» (Briggs 1988, p. 21). Thus the beginning of Victoria's reign saw «the end of the Rule of Taste» (p. 27) and the development of a market offering a uniform variety of products which apparently came from the «inexhaustible mines of bad taste», Birmingham and Sheffield, while Manchester was the capital of cheap-made machine goods (Briggs 1988, p. 38). Henry Cole, who would not only actively promote the Great Exhibition but also found in 1855 the Victoria & Albert Museum, described such products as «art objects» thus placing a seal on the impure relationship at the core of many Victorian art works, welding mechanical skill to high art. Copies or models – in metal, stone, marble, plaster, fabric, carpet, oil painting, ceramic, linoleum, celluloid – filled shop windows, elegant arcades, and indeed were gathered in the biggest display of such items, the Great Exhibition of Art and Industry held in London in 1851.

The Great Exhibition is an international affair: the number of exhibitors, 13,937; the exhibits are arranged according to categories, such as (in succession, ascending or the reverse): Raw Materials; Machinery; Manufactures; Textile Fabrics; Metallic; Vitreous and Ceramic; Miscellaneous; and finally, Fine Arts. The borderline between the pure original and the impure copy is nowhere to be seen, or even detected, owing to the accent set by propaganda on the artistry of the manufactured objects, and to their composite nature as well, mixing practical use and surface ornamentation. Actually the principles adopted by the juries to confer prizes and medals were



novelty, ingenuity, economy in cost and maintenance, durability, excellence of workmanship, fitness for purpose, new application of old principles, application of new principles [...] improved beauty of form, [...] accuracy and certainty of performance, [...] beauty of design in form and colour, or both, with reference to utility. (Anon. 1981, p. 17)

Despite the inclusion of «Fine Arts» among the items on display, there is no reference to purity of taste, romantically intended as the unique and genuine expression of genius. Nevertheless, the connection of these frankly utilitarian categories with taste, and its improvement, based upon technological advancements in the manufacturing process, is noted and emphasized by Queen Victoria in her own diary:

It is very gratifying to see the immense improvement in taste in all the manufactures, for the greater part of which they have to thank my beloved husband. The taste of some of the plate and jewelry is beautiful, none struck us so much, as so likely to be useful for the taste of the country, as Elkington's beautiful specimens of electro-plate [...]. (p. 20)

Thus, we realize that – according to the Queen and her beloved husband – the word «taste» has indeed come to define the very product of the once-dreaded Manchester steam engines, and similar manufactures. This is considered an immense improvement. The new techniques for coating, electroplating, moulding, dyeing, printing cheap materials as if they were genuine silver, marble, china or brocade are awarded the prize medal, especially if the products prove durable, economic, new, easy to maintain, coloured and useful. On the one hand, there is no end to imitation, and to the skilful use of cheaper material instead of valuable precious substances; on the other hand, the new art objects thus produced display a strange mixture, welding together high subject, cheap surface decoration, and low, everyday, humble use.

The catalogue of the Great Exhibition has ornamental clocks which include a gothic belfry with ringers; electroplated cutlery with fanciful handles shaped like a naked Venus; a Gladiatorial Table, sustained by the armed fighter, naked, kneeling underneath; a Photographic Table, with oval daguerreotypes inserted on the top; a Stove of polished iron plate, in the form of a knight in full armour; a bird cage in the shape of a Chinese pagoda; and a collection of stuffed animals, ludicrous, especially the frog shaving his companion, described by Queen Victoria as «really marvellous» (pp. 64-91).

George Baxter (1804-1867), the inventor of the colour print process (over 20 colours applied to the metal keyplate, patented in 1835), did most of the illustrations for the Great Exhibition (Scheuerle 2011). This is indeed an age of mass-visual culture, and the proliferation of images is as technologically various and diversified into photographs, prints, magic lanterns shows, stereoscopes, transfers (Jordan, Christ 1995). Most tan-



talizingly, within the huge Victorian market of images, one can spot again those religious subjects, which had been previously and most dogmatically banned, as the product of impure taste. A poster advertising a magic lantern show contains a telling oxymoron:

Grand Magic Lantern Exhibition: 40 Schriptural Views, 12 Pilgrims Progress; 60 Miscellaneous [...] 25 Crayon Transparencies [...] 40 Comics. In all over 200 views of a strictly moral character. Nothing to offend the most fastidious person. (Brunetta 1988, p. 14)

In the chapter «Images of Fame» Briggs reminds us that besides magic lantern slides, dioramas and *cartes de visite*, also the Staffordshire figures offered portraits of famous characters to customers at home as well as in Europe, and in quite ecumenical fashion. Apart from the British market, to which the Staffordshire manufactures offered Queen Victorias, Prince Alberts, Wellingtons, Tennysons, Gladstones, Latimers and figures of the famous singer Jenny Lind,

There were no religious inhibitions in the export business either. While some of the images designed for Britain were aggressively protestant [...] there was no hesitation in producing Roman Catholic images for Roman Catholic countries [...]. This was trade, and English Roman Catholics could be catered for, too. Two untitled pairs, showing a friar and a nun, were produced at the height of the anti-Popery campaigns [...]. (Briggs 1988, p. 148)

Thus Lewis's impure monk and sinful nuns are now industrially produced as decorative figures, and sold by the thousand. The profits of commerce steer the relationship of British industry with the worshippers of impure images in Europe, and beyond. And even the pure classical Greek charm of the Elgin marbles – and other unique masterpieces – is now diluted into a new type of ware, the so-called Parian marble, «a development of biscuit porcelain which is often quite wrongly described as marble» or as «statuary porcelain» (p. 150). In 1846, the *Art Journal* extols the value and implicitly the good taste of artifacts made in Parian ware:

We attach very great importance to this material [...] as offering a valuable medium for the multiplication of works of a higher order of art, at a price which will render them generally available. (p. 150)

From the purity of the Greek originals admired in museums, the British now move to the numberless replicas obtained owing to chemical technology and mechanic skill, which can adorn the drawing room, and in smaller, portable size, the mantelpiece and the what-not.



Figure 2. *Part of the Fine Arts Court*. Lithograph after J. Michael, with secular and religious virtuoso carving. In: John Absolon, *Recollections of the Great Exhibition*, Lloyd Brothers & Co.; Simpkin Marshall & Co., 1851. Available at <http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/recollectionsgr00abso>

As for the purity of taste, Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854) gives us a clear statement of the dramatic reversal that has occurred. The gentleman from London, a government officer, delivers a speech to the Coketown boys and girls, which is meant to steer their notion of taste, in fact according to the guidelines issued by the Department of Practical Art in the aftermath of the Great Exhibition (Collins 1963, p. 157):

«You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use», said the gentleman, «for all these purposes, combinations and modifications

(in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste». (Craig 1969, p. 52)

The agenda of taste is now synonymous with fact: that is to say, with the catalogues of products offered by manufacturers of cheap goods to those who live in places like Coketown. The idea is to promote industrial design (Dickens 1969, p. 319). No doubt, other wealthier citizens are allowed a greater decorative and imaginative freedom in matters of taste, but in Coketown people are told that wall paper with fancy patterns, carpets with flowers in Brussels style, crockery with exotic patterns (the Minton china so admired by Queen Victoria) are not applicable to the homes of the working-class, who must stick to facts: and buy carpets and wall-paper only bearing mathematical figures and combinations of primary colours. While attacking the over-decorating side of Victorian taste, Dickens also caricatures the bureaucratic view of art, with, possibly, a critique of the Philistine view of art (p. 319). Again, Henry Cole, the promoter of the Great Exhibition, whose identity is possibly inspiring Dickens's mouthpiece of taste in *Hard Times*, had stated that in 1851

for the first time in the world's history, the Men of Arts, Science and Commerce were permitted by their respective governments to meet together to discuss and promote those objects for which civilized natures exist. (Briggs 1988, p. 72)

#### 4 The Chemistry of Taste, Industry and Aesthetic Judgement

Henry Cole's statement celebrates the triangulation between art, science and commerce as an achievement beneficial to human nature in its most civilized state: and no doubt such a comprehensive effect is possible owing to the augmented agency given to the category of taste, and all the products it can encompass in its reach. I should like to suggest here that such a triangulation occurs, and may be critically viewed, under the overarching umbrella of chemistry. Chemistry is not only the science which serves the interests of industrial technology and of the manufacturing firms, but also, and most frequently in Victorian times, the epistemological source from which the aptest metaphors about human nature are derived. Hence chemistry, in the context of this article, as the science welding together art and commerce, is also relevant to the «facts» of modern taste.

Leading critics, intellectuals, novelists, adopt chemistry as symbol and metaphor of those mixed elements – whether in history, art, or aesthetics – that react one upon each other, producing new substances. Chemistry

had already been described as the science whose progressive reach would obtain leading status within the Victorian epistemic horizon: such a view was implied by the education of Victor Frankenstein, initially entangled with alchemy and its ancient philosophers, then a student of chemistry at Ingolstadt: «Through the revelations of modern chemical science the young man has a blinding vision of how the old dreams of the alchemists may be realized» (Sutherland 1998, p. 29). But it's Ruskin's again, in *The Eagle's Nest: Ten Lectures on the Relation of Natural Science to Art* (1872), the voice declaring the pre-eminence of chemistry in the century, and the dangers arising from it:<sup>2</sup>

Nay, truth, and success, are often to us more deadly than error. Perhaps no progress more triumphant has been made in any science than that of Chemistry; but the practical fact which will remain for the contemplation of the future, is that we have lost the art of painting on glass, and invented gun-cotton and nitro-glycerine. (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 22, p. 147)

Chemistry is synonymous with progress, but he wonders: «what are we good for, but to damage the spire, knock down half the houses, and burn the library, – and declare there is no God but Chemistry?» (vol. 22, p. 262).

While declaring that chemical works, all over England, show the worst picture of progress, spoiling its landscape, soil and air, Ruskin also recommends that students should study chemistry, and that artists should learn the chemistry of colours, of manipulation and of manufacture (vol. 11, p. 53). This last statement again suggests that the triangulation of art, science and commerce must be kept on the foreground – especially when the chemistry of Victorian taste is the subject of investigation.

The quotations offered in the following paragraphs show that Ruskin, Walter Pater and Vernon Lee mention chemistry as the ideal metaphor to describe – by analogy with a process at once obscure to the non-initiated, but aspiring to the clarity of scientific precision – inexplicable, confused, indeed impure phenomena. One of these phenomena Ruskin investigates in *Modern Painters* is «imagination associative, the grandest mechanical power that the human intelligence possesses»:

By its operation, two ideas are chosen out of an infinite mass [...], two ideas which are separately wrong, which together shall be right, and of whose unity, therefore, the idea must be formed at the instant they are seized, as it is only in that unity that either is good [...]. This opera-

2 In *The Haunted Man* (1848) Dickens portrays a chemistry professor, Redlaw, posited halfway between alchemy and modern science, with its dehumanizing effects (Marroni 2015, pp. 27-47).

tion of mind, so far as I can see, is absolutely inexplicable, but there is something like it in chemistry.

The action of sulphuric acid on metallic zinc affords an instance of what was once called Disposing Affinity. [...] Zinc decomposes pure water at common temperatures with extreme slowness; but as soon as sulphuric acid is added, decomposition of the water takes place rapidly, though the acid merely unites with oxide of zinc. [...] The obscurity of this explanation arises from regarding changes as consecutive, which are in reality simultaneous. [...] Now, if the imaginative artist will permit us, with all deference, to represent his combining intelligence under the figure of sulphuric acid [...] we shall have an excellent type, in material things, of the action of the imagination on the immaterial. Both actions are, I think, inexplicable. (vol. 4, pp. 234-235)<sup>3</sup>

Despite the scientific outlook, the action of the imagination is inexplicable: and this is exactly the value Ruskin distils from the analogy, chemistry providing the best instance of an obscure simultaneous reaction. Chemistry is recurred to again when Ruskin has to explain «The Nature of Gothic» in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853):

We have, then, the Gothic character submitted to our analysis, just as the rough mineral is submitted to that of the chemist, entangled with many other foreign substances, itself perhaps in no place pure, or ever to be obtained or seen in purity for more than an instant; but nevertheless a thing of definite and separate nature; however inextricable or confused in appearance. Now observe: the chemist defines his mineral by two separate kinds of character; one external, its crystalline form, hardness, lustre, etc., the other internal, the proportions and nature of its constituent atoms. Exactly in the same manner, we shall find that Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements. (vol. 10, pp. 182-183)

Here as elsewhere, in *The Ethics of the Dust: Ten Lectures to Little Housewives on the Elements of Crystallisation* (1866),<sup>4</sup> Ruskin displays a marked

3 Years later in *Fors Clavigera* (Letter 83, Nov. 1877) Ruskin will go back to that statement in order to explain the inventive power of art and enchanted design: «Among the other virtues of the great classic masters, this of enchanted Design is, of all, the least visible to the present apothecary mind; for although, when I first gave analysis of the inventive power in Modern Painters, I was best able to illustrate its combining method by showing that 'there was something like it in chemistry', it is precisely what is like it in chemistry, that the chemist of to-day denies» (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 29, p. 265).

4 Also in *The Two Paths: Being Lectures on Art, and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture, Delivered in 1858-59* (1859); see Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 16, pp. 245-424.

interest in chemistry and its processes – especially crystallization. The study of crystals, and the mysterious relationship between their outward form and the constituent atoms, opens up the landscape of geology and thus the extended epistemic horizon of natural and human history. Again, Ruskin is seeking those immaterial relationships between the most advanced scientific knowledge and the mysterious laws which govern human nature, and its seemingly impure components (Orestano 2012). Investigating the Mental Expression as well as the Material Form of Gothic architecture, Ruskin has to adopt the useful analogy with chemistry ‘because’ of its impure nature:

§ V. Let us go back for a moment to our chemistry, and note that, in defining a mineral by its constituent parts, it is not one nor another of them, that can make up the mineral, but the union of all: for instance, it is neither in charcoal, nor in oxygen, nor in lime, that there is the making of chalk, but in the combination of all three in certain measures; they are all found in very different things from chalk, and there is nothing like chalk either in charcoal or in oxygen, but they are nevertheless necessary to its existence. So in the various mental characters which make up the soul of Gothic. (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 10, p. 183)

In Ruskin – who reads *Elements of Chemistry* (1827) by Edward Turner, M.D. – the chemical analogy is adopted to describe the associative powers of the mind, or a complex period in the history of architecture. In Walter Pater’s «Preface» to *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877), the work of the chemist is referred to again, now to describe the passionate response of the aesthetic critic – the reaction to beauty that even more than subjective taste can affect the senses. Beauty indeed, rather than described by abstract formulas or distant hagiography, has to do with those impressions which affect and stimulate the intimate response of the beholder, the reader, the critic. Walter Pater, like a modern chemist, works as it were in a scientific laboratory, where strange mixed elements are analysed, tracing the latent energy of an image or an idea, from its impure natural state to a condition of purity that may permit its identification and classification:

And the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others. (Hill 1980, pp. xx-xxi)



Indeed, while dealing with the Renaissance, the accent falls «on the coming of what is called ‘the modern spirit’, with its realism, its appeal to experience»: thus Leonardo da Vinci would anticipate the ideas of modern science, and Pater is fascinated by the transmutation Leonardo seems to operate, carrying the spirit of ancient alchemy into his scientific version of knowledge. Ruskin and Pater will be the first in a line of critics – T.S. Eliot included – who use chemistry to describe the personal reaction to art, its constituents, and the artist’s imagination.

Dedicated to Pater, also Vernon Lee’s *Euphorion. Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (1884) describes periods in human history, culture and art as so many landscapes dyed in different chemical colours: «For a period in history is like a more or less extended real landscape: it has, if you will, actual, chemically defined colours» (Lee 1884, vol. 1, pp. 9-10). More specifically, Lee moves from the metaphor of the chemical dyes to that of the gases, and the fascinating, potentially poisonous gaseous mixture that may arise from their mutual chemical reaction:

The Renaissance has interested and interests me, [...] for the manner in which the many things inherited from both Middle Ages and Renaissance, [...] acted and reacted upon each other, united in concord or antagonism; forming, like the gases of the chemist, new things, sometimes like and sometimes unlike themselves and each other; producing now some unknown substance of excellence and utility, at other times some baneful element, known but too well elsewhere, but unexpected here. (vol. 1, pp. 7-8)

But again, as with Walter Pater, the principal function of the chemistry metaphor or simile is that of throwing its prismatic light upon the present, so as to trace back from antiquity, and specifically from the myth of the Italian Renaissance, the notion of its impure energy, and its hidden, yet threatening, potential. The character of *Euphorion* is the case in point. An exemplary missing link within the discourse of atavism, highlighted by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), *Euphorion* is remodeled by Vernon Lee as part of our cultural memory (See Canani 2015):

Not only is our modern culture no child of Faustus and Helena, but it is the complex descendant, strangely featured by atavism from various sides, of many and various civilizations; and the eighteenth century, so far from being a Faustus evoking as his bride the long dead Helen of Antiquity, was in itself a curiously varied grandchild or great-grandchild of such a marriage, its every moral feature, its every intellectual movement proclaiming how much of its being was inherited from Antiquity. (vol. 1, pp. 6-7)

The critical discourse, which in fin de siècle England activates the passionate reception of the unorthodox mixture in the arts, religions and philosophy of the Italian Renaissance, has its catalyst function well beyond the category of taste, owing to its accent on modern culture, and the modern mind, within the context of the Victorian cultural orthodoxies: Victorian purity versus Renaissance impurity. But it is not only a matter of art criticism, of periodization. The function of chemistry is to vouchsafe the mixture between the pure and the impure which characterizes so many assessments of the nature of the Renaissance, but also underscores its seductive images with pointed references to the present.

## 5 Pure/Impure in the Laboratory of Literature

Such a world is indeed «the world in which we live»: the one R.L. Stevenson evokes in his essay «Pan's Pipes» (1881), where a distant nostalgia for one of the mythical figures of the Renaissance is translated into the modern dilemma which actively engages philosophers and chemists:

The world in which we live has been variously said and sung by the most ingenious poets and philosophers: these reducing it to formulae and chemical ingredients, those striking the lyre in high-sounding measures for the handiwork of God. What experience supplies is of a mingled tissue, and the choosing mind has much to reject before it can get together the materials of a theory. (Stevenson 1925, p. 125)

The figure of Pan, for all its mythological antique trimmings, survives at once in the terrors and desires of modern humankind: as the iconic representation of a psychological condition, insofar as «There are moments when the mind refuses to be satisfied with evolution, and demands a ruddier representation of the sum of man's experience» (p. 128). Like a chemist in his laboratory, Stevenson remarks that to extract a formula – to distil and purify the compound of mind and body – looks like an impossible task, despite the proud assertions of modern science:

To certain smoke-dried spirits matter and motion and elastic æthers, and the hypothesis of this to that spectacled professor, tell a speaking story; but for youth and all ductile and congenial minds, Pan is not dead, but of all the classic hierarchy alone survives in triumph. (p. 126)

Chemistry indeed is not the only answer to the fundamental questions of modern life. Panic terror, joy and desire are not accounted for, inasmuch as «Science writes of the world as if with the cold finger of a starfish» (p. 128). Stevenson will give full fictional stature to this opposition in work to come.



Chemistry, however, proceeds in its own triumphant right, not only as the recurring metaphor for the analytical process required by the present condition of England, but as a science most prominent in the epistemic horizon of the times. Chemistry is the object of the «pseudo-frank confession» offered by the great chemist and wise criminal Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-1860). Fosco, who is affiliated to the Italian Carboneria (and thus an early member of that brotherhood of chemists employed in manufacturing bombs all over Europe),<sup>5</sup> gives the reader a «rhapsody on mind-altering substances» – on chemistry indeed – that according to John Sutherland «reverberates to the topics of the day» (Sutherland 2008, pp. xviii-xix).

Chemistry, especially, has always had irresistible attractions for me, from the enormous, the illimitable power which the knowledge of it confers. Chemists, I assert it emphatically, might sway, if they pleased, the destinies of humanity. Let me explain this before I go further.

Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body. The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates – the Chemist. [...] On my sacred word of honor, it is lucky for society that modern chemists are, by incomprehensible good fortune, the most harmless of mankind. The mass are worthy fathers of families who keep shops. The few are philosophers besotted with admiration for the sound of their own lecturing voices; [...]. Thus Society escapes; and the illimitable power of chemistry remains the slave of the most superficial and the most insignificant ends. (pp. 617-618)

According to Fosco, chemistry is endowed with illimitable power, so that even an artist like Shakespeare, a scientist like Newton, a warrior like Alexander the Great, would be automatically transformed by a chemical potion into their undeserving counterparts, into low replicas made of the vilest material: into a drooling writer, a stolid mind, a coward. It is not difficult to view in this statement the ultimate result of Dr. Jekyll's experiment, narrated in Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

Stevenson's hero, apparently one of the most respectable members of the scientific community, will have to face his replica, which he produces after an experiment performed owing to his notions in chemistry.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Lan-

5 On bombs and detonators using chemistry and clock mechanism in Stevenson's and Conrad's fiction, see Arnett Melchiori (1985).

6 In his *Annotated Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dury reminds us that the scientific basis for the transformation was criticized by Bennet, James and Bridges. See Dury (2005, p. 166, n. 1).

yon's narrative aptly fills the stage with all the chemical paraphernalia, insisting on the peculiarly changing dyes:<sup>7</sup>

The powders were neatly enough made up, but not with the nicety of the dispensing chemist; so that it was plain they were of Jekyll's private manufacture; and when I opened one of the wrappers I found what seemed to me a simple crystalline salt of a white colour. The phial, to which I next turned my attention, might have been about half-full of a blood-red liquor, which was highly pungent to the sense of smell and seemed to me to contain phosphorus and some volatile ether. At the other ingredients I could make no guess.

[...]

[Hyde] measured out a few minims of the red tincture and added one of the powders. The mixture, which was at first of a reddish hue, began, in proportion as the crystals melted, to brighten in colour, to effervesce audibly, and to throw off small fumes of vapour. Suddenly and at the same moment, the ebullition ceased and the compound changed to a dark purple, which faded again more slowly to a watery green. (Dury 2005, pp. 154-157)

Faith in chemistry undergoes, in this ambiguously recited drama, the same oscillations which affect human nature, and previously eroded all notions of pure taste. Confidently preparing the tincture, Dr. Jekyll wants to split the mingled duplicity of his nature into its essential units, identified as the higher and the lower elements of his soul. A Ruskinian ambition, indeed. From what he deems impure, he wants to distil pure, separate identities. What he achieves, instead, is a smaller replica, uglier, ape-like, as far as we can know, energetic and wicked, who increasingly haunts his good self, even when Jekyll does not assume the potion. Trying to escape the persecution from his lower replica, Dr. Jekyll resorts to chemistry, as the natural source of a possible solution.

My provision of the salt, which had never been renewed since the date of the first experiment, began to run low. I sent out for a fresh supply, and mixed the draught; the ebullition followed, and the first change of colour, not the second; I drank it and it was without efficiency. You will learn from Poole how I have had London ransacked; it was in vain. (p. 185)

Despite these efforts, Jekyll's attempt to get rid of his wicked double is unsuccessful. In this moral parable on the human condition, served as a lurid

7 The blood-red colour of the liquid also evokes Doctor Faustus's blood used as ink. See C. de Stasio (1982).

gothic story where terror is enhanced by the rational aura of science and the high status of chemistry, the supreme irony is unleashed at the very ending. In his final statement, Dr. Jekyll has to admit: «I am now persuaded that my first supply was impure, and that it was that unknown impurity which lent efficacy to the draught» (p. 185).

Stevenson did intentionally point out – with his man of science – the fundamental question, apparently ignored in the mingled tissue of Victorian society: where did the impure element lie? Not in ideology, gender, class, race, not in the hegemonic discourse of history: those were based on clear-cut categories, ideally pure, resting on sharply-defined borderlines. But then critics and intellectuals, on the one hand, and writers of fiction, on the other, would focus on changing dyes, gaseous mixtures, aggregations of atoms of diverse elements to describe the present condition, whose nature demanded the acknowledgement of impurity. In his story Stevenson precipitates notions about pure and impure substances, to the extent that he seems to offer an impurity theory, with Dr. Jekyll's last statement of the case. Critics dwell on *Jekyll and Hyde* as on a Doppelgänger narrative strategy, made more poignant by the impossibility to reflect the double in the psychic mirror, or by the sheer absence of Hyde's face and its description in the very text he physically inhabits (Ambrosini 2001; Sutherland 1998). In the context of this article, however, the element of purity becomes paramount: together with the final acknowledgment of the impurity inextricably mingled with it.

Indeed, like Collins before him, here Stevenson provides a mixture of different literary elements: his story suggests a systematic revision of the traditional gothic conventions, starting from the transformation of the castle into the cabinet, and the adaptation of the gothic chase to a pattern of different genres as so many screens hiding the ultimate discovery. To incorporate such diversity within one single narrative meant indeed to embrace a composite, ornamental style – a procedure which marks the literary offer towards the end of the century, with imitation and incorporation of so many specialized discourses. If a formula should be suggested for the process here described, we could indicate that, from high art and taste, we shift to replicas and fashion, and end up in sensation and professionalism (Costantini 2015), or in the mechanical trade, so despised by Reynolds and Ruskin alike. Such literary products are similar to baroque compositions, owing to the blurring of frame and content, the multiplicity of genre perspectives, omniscience and monologue, simultaneity of physical and spiritual, realism and fantasy, excess of surface ornamentation. Professional writers attract and entice a mass readership by offering a democratic proliferation of spicy replicas. Selective taste now agrees with the eclectic bulimia of the consumers of literature. Thus the well-known, frequently quoted tag by the Italian baroque poet Giovan Battista Marino – «è del poeta il fin la maraviglia» – may well be used to describe,

*mutatis mutandis*, a condition in which the sensation effect has become paramount to art and to literary production.

Against the admission of the fundamental impurity of the mingled tissue of life, of the impure nature of man, and the arts he or she may produce, the twentieth-century avant-garde will operate with a clean hard sweep, a ruthless formalism, a move into pure abstraction as the strategy needed to purify the proliferation of images which swamp the Victorian market, the Victorian home, the eyes of the beholder, the taste of the reader. Soon, however, Kitsch and Camp will re-affirm the domain of impurity, as the only alternative we are offered, within a horizon where purity means sheer emptiness and solitude. But this is another story.

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## Starving by Numbers

### William Farr, Medical Statistics and the Social Aesthetics of Hunger

Andrew Mangham  
(University of Reading, UK)

**Abstract** This essay considers how literary and medical representations of hunger developed into an impure aesthetic in the nineteenth century. With specific reference to the Social Problem Novel, it questions how the tension between traditional, folkloric understandings of hunger and more positivist approaches by medical statisticians raised important questions about how we understand poverty and suffering.

**Keywords** Literature. Medicine. Starvation. Statistics.

I lay by the side of a brook resting from my fatigue, until I felt tormented by hunger and thirst. This roused me from my nearly dormant state, and I ate some berries which I found hanging on the trees, or lying on the ground. I slaked my thirst at the brook, and then lying down, was overcome by sleep.

(Mary Shelley)

So narrates the ill-fated Creature of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The novel, as countless critics have pointed out, is extraordinary for its studies of the human condition, which include subjects as broad as the disastrous effects of ambition, the limits and reaches of science, the development of perception and intelligence, and, most important to the aims of my essay, the impact and importance of an 'aesthetic' representation of hardship and loss. «Listen to my tale», «hear my tale», say Frankenstein and his monster respectively, as they begin the narratives with which they outline their miserable experiences. The Creature's own hunger forms an emotive aspect to his story but so too does the hunger of the De Lacey family:

A considerable period elapsed before I discovered one of the causes of the uneasiness of this admirable family; it was poverty: and they suffered that evil in a very distressing degree. Their nourishment consisted entirely of the vegetables of their garden, and the milk of one cow, who gave very little during the winter, when its masters could scarcely procure food to support it. They often, I believe, suffered the pangs of



hunger very poignantly, especially the two younger cottagers; for several times they placed food before the old man, when they reserved none for themselves. (Butler 1998, p. 88)

The Creature's understanding of the emotional aspect of hunger is simultaneous with an aestheticization of the same. «I was deeply affected by it», he says, it «moved me sensibly» (pp. 87-88). Such responses may be influenced by the Creature's own memories of hungering in the forests of Ingolstadt, but it also has much to do with his learning about literature and, specifically, how narrative shapes and gives life to loss and privation. It is in his hovel by the side of the De Lacey cottage that he reads *Plutarch's Lives* (1517) *Paradise Lost* (1667), and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) – books that portray loss and tragedy and explore the relationship between these themes and the form of the literary lament. «I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books», says the Creature, «They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection» (p. 103). It is also in his hovel that the Creature first hears the De Laceys' history of condemnation: «Some time elapsed before I learned the history of my friends. It was one which could not fail to impress itself deeply on my mind, unfolding as it did a number of circumstances each interesting and wonderful to one so utterly inexperienced as I was» (pp. 97-98). Readers of the novel might say the same thing about the Creature himself; his various experiences of hunger (physiological, social, and intellectual) are saddening because they form part of a larger story of misery. His narrative encourages us to sympathise with a murderer – not with his violence at all – but with the sorrows that lead up to it.

In the voice of Frankenstein's Monster we hear an echo of how hunger is understood and communicated through narrative. Hunger is an instinct and a basic physiological need, yet it is also a tradition of writing – an aesthetic that has for centuries turned base animal sensations into a humanitarian problem and a lament. As forms go, this is one of the oldest. In *Famine: A Short History*, Cormac Ó Gráda notes that «famine is remembered in folklore and oral history» (Ó Gráda 2009, p. 7). Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs from the Island of Sehel give the following account from the Third Dynasty (2686-13 BCE):

I was in mourning on my throne,  
Those of the palace were in grief,  
My heart was in great affliction,  
Because [the flood] had failed to come in time  
In a period of seven years.  
Grain was scant,  
Kernels were dried up,  
Scarce was every kind of food.



Every man robbed his twin, [...]  
Children cried,  
Youngsters fell,  
The hearts of the old were grieving;  
Legs drawn up, they hugged the ground,  
Their arms clasped about them.  
Courtiers were needy,  
Temples were shut,  
Shrines covered with dust,  
Everyone was in distress.  
(Quoted in Lichtheim 1980, pp. 95-96)

As the Irish famines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were to show with equal poignancy, the concept of hunger, as a social catastrophe, has been inseparable from popular oral traditions. It was in the nineteenth century, with seemingly misguided legislation leaving many a man, woman and child undernourished, that this method of 'storifying' hunger became its most politically charged. According to Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), for example:

Cast into the whirlpool, [the poor man] must struggle through as well as he can. [...] If he can get no work he may steal, if he is not afraid of the police, or starve, in which case the police will take care that he does so in a quiet and inoffensive manner. During my residence in England, at least twenty or thirty persons have died of simple starvation under the most revolting circumstances, and a jury has rarely been found possessed of the courage to speak the plain truth in the matter. [...] But indirectly, far more than directly, many have died of starvation, where long-continued want of proper nourishment has called forth fatal illness, when it has produced such debility that causes which might otherwise have remained inoperative brought on severe illness and death.  
(Kiernan 1987, pp. 69-70)

The cause of this state of affairs, according to Engels, is modern «capital, the direct or indirect control of the means of subsistence and production» (p. 69). There is no collectively-experienced famine in the English towns, he says, «it is only individuals who starve» (p. 70), yet they do so in the dark and in the dirt. Rarely has a jury been inclined, he notes, to «speak the plain truth» and, though his account of the poor man is a hypothetical one, it nevertheless belongs to a tradition of folkloric narration. Addressing «Working Men» in his preface, Engels says:

I have studied the various official and non-official documents as far as I was able to get hold of them - I have not been satisfied with this, I

wanted more than a mere *abstract* knowledge of my subject. I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your every-day life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors. [... I] devoted my leisure-hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain working men; I am both glad and proud of having done so. (p. 27)

Engels feels the need to supplement his research with his own observations and with the stories that working men tell. What his book represents, then, is a mixture of first-hand observations, facts and figures from government committee papers, and stories of the plights of individual workers and workforces. An obviously political venture, *Condition of the Working Classes* uses an aesthetics of impurity that has come to be associated with the nineteenth century – a preoccupation with miserable stories, not solely as a form of lament, but also as a form of social realism and political statement.

It is worth revisiting well-known «Condition of England» texts with a view to exploring how hunger might have been aestheticized. Criticism has tended to take as read the nineteenth century's humanitarian 'discovery' of starvation. What I argue is that the period saw a radical overhaul of the concept of hunger; it went from a one-dimensional lamentation to a complex, messy even, source of debate between politicians, statisticians, doctors, journalists and writers of fiction. We see this shift figured in *Bleak House* (1852-53) where Tom-All-Along's is introduced as follows:

Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, or by low church, or by no church; whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of his mind or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. In the midst of which dust and noise there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit. (Sanders 1994, p. 568)

It is well known that Dickens was keen to promote a balance between the age's «tendency to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like» (Hoppé 1966, vol. 2, p. 279) and the kind of compassionate overview which he saw his own brand of storytelling as exemplifying. In Dickens's polemics we catch a glimpse of the shift in the way hunger was understood and represented. No longer an impotent outcry against acts of God like a barren floodplain,

stories of hunger became interested in the ways empirical data could be used in the fight against the worst effects of the industrial age. The novel form, as Dickens shows, became a key means of addressing the balance between sympathy and hard statistics. What I suggest, then, is that we see the Social Problem Novel as a place in which the forces of the lament, on the one hand, and newer energies of statistical and scientific observation, on the other, are brought into productive and illuminating dialogue.

The «Condition of England» novels highlight how the emotional aspect of hunger was felt to be at risk of getting cordoned off during the first half of the nineteenth century. The New Poor Law had had the ambition or the effect of 'tidying away' the pauper class by consigning it to workhouses and slum silos. The folkloric tradition of 'storifying' hunger appears to have been under some threat from the new measures simply because expressing oneself artistically from within the pauper camp was next to impossible. Such is made clear in Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet; An Autobiography* (1850), when the protagonist describes his literary labours:

When my kind cough awoke me, I rose, and creeping like a mouse about the room – for my mother and sister slept in the next chamber, and every sound was audible through the narrow partition – I drew my darling books out from under a board on the floor [...].

No wonder that with this scanty rest, and this complicated exertion of hands, eyes, and brain, followed by the long dreary day's work of the shop, my health began to fail; my eyes grew weaker; my cough became more acute; my appetite failed me daily. [...] Look at the picture awhile, ye comfortable folks, who take down from your shelves what books you like best at the moment, and then lie back, amid prints and statuettes, to grow wise in an easy chair, with a blazing fire and a camphine lamp. The lower classes uneducated! Perhaps you would be so too, if learning cost you the privation which it costs some of them. (Cripps 1983, pp. 36-37)

Of course, what applies to Locke's reading also applies to his writing. When he produces a set of poems based on the style of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816-18) and the works of Tennyson, he is asked by the radical book seller Sandy Mackay, «Are ye gaun to be like they puir aristocrat bod-ies that wad suner hear an Italian dog howl, than an English nightingale sing, and winna harken to Mr. John Thomas till he calls himself Giovanni Thomasino» (p. 86). Mackay then takes the hero to St. Giles:

Look! there's not a soul down that yard but's either beggar, drunkard, thief, or warse. Write anent that! Say how ye saw the mouth o' hell, and the two pillars thereof at the entry – the pawnbroker's shop o' one side and the gin palace at the other – twa monstrous deevils, eating up men, and women, and bairns, body and soul. Look at the jaws o' the

monsters, how they open and open, and swallow in anither victim and anither. Write anent that. [...] Which is maist to your business? – thae bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o’ the other side o’ the world, or these – these thousands o’ bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o’ your ain side – made out o’ your ain flesh and blude? You a poet! True poetry, like true charity, my laddie, begins at hame. (p. 88)

Contained within this important passage is the manifesto of Locke’s Chartist poetry as it develops. This is not the art of «beauty as truth and truth as beauty», but the aesthetics of ugly truth; beauty, imagination, and the exotic must play second fiddle to the grim realities of modern London. This is because, as Mackay knows, true poetry is also powerfully political. It is shown to be so by the text itself when it portrays the middle-class dean’s willingness to patronise Locke’s poetry so long as the more radical elements are left out. Similarly, the protagonist is convinced by his second love interest, Eleanor Staunton, that his vocation is to travel to America and write about his explorations. Predictably, the poet dies *en route*. Robbed of his polemic realism, he is pressed out of a narrative that comes to represent, self-reflexively, mid-century discussions of the social question.

One prominent example of the drift towards the quarantining of the Condition of England question was felt to be found, as we know from Dickens, in the work of political economists and statisticians. Their belief, speaking generally, was that human development obeyed certain «laws». Statistician William Farr believed, for example, that the force of figures was key to understanding the real nature of hunger. According to John M. Eyler:

Farr agreed wholeheartedly that the phenomena of life and death were law-abiding, and he believed rational medicine possible only when such vital laws were assumed. [...] Early in his career Farr explained, «observation proves that generations succeed each other, develop their energies, are afflicted with sickness, and waste in the procession of their life, according to fixed laws». (Eyler 1979, p. 32)

It is easy to see why this idea displeased Dickens. The view that men live in predictable patterns ran the risk of erasing their basic human qualities, as well as barring the kind of emotional responses that their suffering had encouraged in more traditional forms like the lament. Farr, however, did recognise that statistics had the potential to reduce stories of suffering to a clipped and unrepresentative number. He had, according to Eyler, «a sensibility more finely tuned by human sympathy and social ideology» than some of his contemporaries: «he rejected the mindless garnering of numbers and had nothing but scorn for the empiric who throws heaps of tables in our faces, and asserts that he can prove anything by figures» (p. 29). In

a letter to the registrar general Thomas Lister, Farr paused a statistical account of the condition of London paupers in order to tell a story:

Medical practitioners meet with many distressing cases of starvation in this metropolis. I will mention one. In the winter of 1838 I was requested, in the middle of the night, to see a woman, who, it was said, was dying for want of help. I followed the messenger through a labyrinth of narrow passages, near Fitzroy market, and found in the corner of an attic a young woman, thinly clad, lying on a straw bedspread upon the floor. She had given birth to a child, then at her feet. Three children lay on the same bed, under a single rug. It was intensely cold. She had no fire, no candle, no food, and, if I recollect right, had not more than three half-pence in money to meet the exigencies of child-birth. The lodgers in the room below had been aroused by her groans. (Farr 1840, p. 163)

It is worth reminding ourselves that this is the work of a statistician; it is not the kind of «reduction» identified by Dickens but a picture that has much in common with Dickens's own account of Tom-All-Along's. Farr's example has all the powerful impact of the oral tradition surrounding hunger: memories get converted into parables that are designed to produce an emotional response. We have a cautionary example here of the problem with assigning sympathetic attributes to literature, on the one hand, and seeing dispassionate empiricism as typical of science, on the other. The dialogue between these two forces (sympathy and empiricism) has always, to use the words of Mary Poovey, developed unevenly. When it came to the representation of hunger, in particular, literature and science shared the same burden of seeking to balance these complex energies.

Eyler correctly surmises that «part of the reason for Farr's more sophisticated understanding of statistics and his greater willingness to discuss the practical implications of [the same] is to be found in his medical bias» (Eyler 1979, p. 29). Farr had been trained as a physician in the medical schools of Paris, even though he was himself from working-class stock. He was born in 1807 to a farm labourer and had had to be apprenticed at the early age of 8 because his family was struggling to make ends meet. Offered several schooling opportunities by his employer, Farr eventually inherited £500 from the same benefactor and pursued a medical education. In 1836, he appeared in *The Lancet* with a couple of lectures on hygiene and public health. In these pieces he was already showing his aptitude for social and statistical medicine, yet his medical training also appeared to have introduced him to many of the personal stories of the social ills he was counting up in his statistical studies. He had administered to the needs of the poor himself, and he knew that behind many a set of figures there was a sad story and a real set of symptoms.

In 1837 Farr complained to Edwin Chadwick at the Poor Law Commission, «your offices are too much occupied, and have too little acquaintance – practical acquaintance – with the subject – to do much in medical statistics» (Farr 1837, p. 148). In 1839 he compiled, for the newly-formed Registrar General's Office, a report on the health and longevity of Britons. In it he wrote:

It will be seen with regret that in the half-year the deaths of 63 individuals were ascribed (principally at inquests) to starvation; this is almost 1 annually to a population of 11,000. The want of food implies the want of everything else – except water – as firing, clothing, every convenience, every necessary of life, is abandoned at the imperious bidding of hunger. Hunger destroys a much higher proportion than is indicated by the registers in this and in every other country; but its effects, like the effects of excess, are generally manifested indirectly, in the production of diseases of various kinds. The privation is rarely absolute; the supply of food is inadequate to supply the wants of the organization, which requires daily animal or vegetable matter containing not less than nine ounces of carbon. (quoted in Glass 1973, p. 146)

Farr's findings greatly displeased Chadwick who had been one of the chief architects of the New Poor Law, and who preferred to believe that the new measures had eradicated starvation in Britain. Farr's comments, Chadwick said in a letter to the Registrar General, are «calculated to produce a belief that the provisions of the law, which are intended to bring relief within the reach of every one needing it, are either inadequate to their object or improperly administered» (Chadwick 1839, p. 150). He and the other Commissioners set about discrediting the report. Not all of its 63 starved individuals were counted from coroner's reports, they found, and of those 63 at least 36 were infants who had died during weaning. Of the adults who had died, a number had refused to go to the workhouse:

Jane Morris (condition of life not stated), aged 47 years, died in the House of Industry, Oswestry, Salop, 18th of September, 1837. Cause assigned in the registry, «*For want of the common necessities of life, refusing the protection of the house*».

Ester Beaumont (condition not stated), aged 57 years, died at Sheffield, Brightside Bierlow, Yorkshire, 31st August, 1837. Cause assigned in the registry, «*Want of the common necessities of life*» (p. 157).

What is remarkable about these accounts is their matter-of-fact style. Gone are the long, sentimental laments we see in other accounts of hunger and, standing in their stead, is a series of sentences that indicate, while they smother, histories of privation: «*Want of the common necessities of*

*life*». A Parish clerk was able to give more information about Ester Beaumont, the last-mentioned Pauper in Chadwick's letter. As a result of the New Law, Ester had lost the outdoor relief she was in receipt of and had been offered, instead, a place in the Workhouse. It seems extraordinary that the Poor Law Commissioners saw her story as a defence of their work rather than a condemnation of it. When the Commission's bare facts get supplemented by a fuller narrative they do more than support the measures of the new legislation; they recapture some of the pathos that had traditionally accompanied the aesthetics of hunger. Written into Chadwick's own account, through accident more than design, was a tension between the figures used as advocacy of the parish system, and the narrative aspects of hunger, which always signalled a cause for humanitarian concern.

While Farr conceded that he was wrong to attribute all of his results to coroners' inquests, he seized upon the obvious conflict in the argument of the Commission: if just one person died of starvation in a relatively affluent country like Britain, then surely this is enough to cause some human, if not professional, concern. Yes, 36 of the 63 may have been infants, but what of the rest? At least 13 people in the table provided by the Commissioners are acknowledged to have died from malnourishment. Farr concludes: «whether starvation occurred therefore in infants, or in the aged; whether it was accidental, inevitable, or the result of negligence, the fact itself remained unchanged; it was still starvation» (Farr 1840, p. 164). And «if there should be one death the less, 'for the future', I ask no other vindication» (p. 167). At the time he was writing *Alton Locke*, Kingsley wrote something very similar to his wife:

We may choose to look at the masses in the gross, as subjects for statistics – and of course, where possible, of profits. There is One above who knows every thirst and ache, and sorrow, and temptation of each slattern, and gin-drinker, and street boy. The day will come when He will require an account of these neglects of ours not in the gross. (Kingsley 1894, vol. 1, p. 180)

Indeed, Farr's earlier comment about the Poor Law Commission's lack of «practical acquaintance» with medical questions appeared to be vindicated. The Commission's concerns with figures, averages and tables had led them away from the basic fact that suffering is suffering, whether it is experienced by one or one-million. As Engels pointed out, it was individuals who starved, not aggregates. To understand the impact of this melancholy fact required an ability to tune into the stories of the few as well as the statistics of the many.

Unsurprisingly, Farr rejected Thomas Malthus's famous claim that famine was the last resort of nature when other «checks» of population growth, such as «war [...], sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague» had



failed (Gilbert 2008, p. 61; Farr 1840, p. 165). As James Vernon observes, Malthus's ideas grew into a belief that «the hungry were objects of opprobrium, not compassion, and any attempt to alleviate their suffering was thought to make them more, not less, dependent» (Vernon 2007, p. 174). In response to the Irish Famine, for instance, Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the British Treasury, noted:

That indirect permanent advantages will accrue to Ireland from the scarcity and the measures taken for its relief, I entertain no doubt. [...] The greatest improvement of all which could take place in Ireland would be to teach the people to depend upon themselves for developing the resources of their country, instead of having recourse to the assistance of the government on every occasion. (Trevelyan 1846, p. 70)

With the tools of medical experience up his sleeve, Farr was able to contest both this point and the New Poor Law ideologies that grew from it. In his view, social, medical and moral problems stemmed from want, rather than preceded it. A high number of medical accounts of hunger in the nineteenth century came from forensic textbooks. Forensic medicine, or «medical jurisprudence» as it was often known at the time, had an interest in civic health, which it often called «medical police» or «state medicine». Later texts such as J. Dixon Mann's *Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* (1893) featured whole chapters on starvation, because, as Mann points out, cases «come under the notice of the medical jurist [usually because] young children or adults of feeble intellect [had] been entirely neglected both as regards nourishment and bodily attention» (Mann 1893, p. 309). The circumstances outlined here are very different to those discussed by Farr and the Poor Law Commission, yet the forensic aspect of hunger shows, most clearly, the medical determination to understand the problem as a story as well as a bare statistic. Mann was a professor of medical jurisprudence in Manchester so he would have been no stranger to the debates introduced by widespread urban problems. He outlines the symptoms of starvation as follows:

The natural feeling of hunger which indicates to a healthy person that the organism is in want of food, disappears after the first thirty-six or forty-eight hours of fasting. There may be a pain and discomfort in the region of the stomach, but it is not associated with a desire for food. Intense thirst is always present, and want of fluids greatly increases the sufferings. Muscular weakness gradually occurs, and is quickly attended by emaciation, which is progressive until the end. The skin is wrinkled and is usually pale, dry, and of a parchments appearance [...]. The features and eyes are sunken, and the malar bones stand prominently out. The mouth and tongue are dry, and the breath has a disagreeable odour, which in some stages of starvation is of an ether-like nature; at a later

stage the whole body gives off a peculiar putrescent odour, but unlike that of ordinary putrefaction. [...] To use a popular phrase, the limbs are little more than skin and bone. The mind may remain clear or may be enfeebled to imbecility; hallucinations are not uncommon. (p. 310)

Mann uses a matter-of-fact tone and yet his enumeration of the symptoms allows him to outline a narrative as sad as any of Dickens's in its own way: it is like he is describing an image, or a body on a post-mortem table, yet terms like «progressive until the end» and «a later stage» also indicate that what is being described is a process, not anything 'inevitable' (like an act of God) or abstract like a set of statistics. This passage is markedly different in tone, for example, to Chadwick's «*want of the common necessities of life*». In spite of its obvious links with the empirical tradition, medicine had, as part of its professional arsenal, an ability to focus on problems as a set of symptoms. Symptoms might be a series of facts, but they might also be developing a story: they grow; they pursue a journey through various stages and they lead, like the Victorian novel, to two possible resolutions: death or the restoration of order. What I argue is that the medico-narrativization of hunger achieved a balance between the subject's long-held associations with pathos and a newer element of scientific observation.

As it emerged in the novel of the mid-nineteenth century, indeed, hunger fits the model of Hugh Grady's «impure aesthetic»:

The idea of the aesthetic, like all our concepts, is a social construct, a signifier whose signified derives from a series of intricate networks, within itself, and with the fragmented world of a complex new, «modern» society. For these reasons, I am arguing, the aesthetic is intrinsically «impure» – it is a place-holder for what is repressed elsewhere in the system; it develops as an autonomous practice but participates in the market economy, the social-system, the political world, the religious communities, and private life. (Grady 2009, p. 21)

In the pages of the Social Problem Novel the aesthetics of hunger was impure for a number of reasons. It was not, as it had been, a one-sided lament, but an knotted subject with polemic currency; it emerged from, and responded to, a range of discourses on hunger – some of which, like medicine, sought to rediscover the means of regretting hunger while recasting it as a series of scientific, economic and political queries.

Like the writings of William Farr, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* was a response to the perceived statistical tendency towards the simplification of starvation. As such, the novel developed an impassioned response to government reports; it also appropriated the desire to represent hunger as a teleological process which crystallised larger narratives of want. Take, for instance, Locke's experience of being both a Cockney and a poet:

I do not complain that I am a Cockney. That, too, is God's gift. He made me one, that I might learn to feel for poor wretches who sit stifled in reeking garrets and workrooms, drinking in disease with every breath – bound in their prison-house of brick and iron, with their own funeral pall hanging over them, in that canopy of fog and poisonous smoke, from their cradle to their grave. I have drunk of the cup of which they drink. And so I have learnt – if, indeed, I have learnt – to be a poet – a poet of the people. That honour, surely, was worth buying with asthma, and rickets, and consumption, and weakness, and – worst of all to me – with ugliness. (Cripps 1983, p. 6)

Alton's working-class roots are what enable him to engage with the real experiences of tailors. Like the medical man, he has direct experience with the material symptoms of abjection yet, as a poet, he has the narrational skills to portray them most effectively. His tools of narrative expression make the problem an immediate reality rather than an abstract statistic. At another point in the novel the protagonist collapses in the street from want:

So on I went with [a] kind-hearted [policeman], who preached solemnly to me all the way on the fifth commandment. But I heard very little of it; for before I had proceeded a quarter of a mile, a deadly faintness and dizziness came over me. I staggered, and fell against the railings. «And have you been a-drinking arter all?»

«I never – a drop in my life – nothing but bread-and-water this fortnight».

And it was true. I had been paying for my own food, and had stinted myself to such an extent, that between starvation, want of sleep, and over-exertion, I was worn to a shadow, and the last drop had filled the cup [...]. I dropped on the pavement, bruising my face heavily. (p. 58)

Alton is then picked up by a couple of medical men. «I tell you what», says one of them, «this fellow's very bad. He's got no more pulse than the Pimlico sewer» (p. 59). Alton has many of the symptoms outlined by J. Dixon Mann and his experiences offer a representation of the effects of hunger as a developing story. Addressing the men who help him after his collapse, Alton the narrator acknowledges in them the kind of direct knowledge of the ugly realities that the poet himself aspires to:

I have never met you again, but I have not forgotten you. Your early life [student years] may be coarse, too often a profligate one – but you know the people, and the people know you: and your tenderness and care, bestowed without hope of repayment, cheers daily many a poor soul in hospital wards and fever-cellars – to meet its reward some day at the people's hands. You belong to us at heart. (pp. 61-62)

A keen scientist himself, Kingsley portrays the natural sciences, through the benevolent yet conservative dean as powerful so long as they are based on observation rather than mathematical logic:

But logic, like mathematics, seems to tell me too little about things. It does not enlarge my knowledge of man or nature; and those are what I thirst for. [...] I see you stealing glances at those natural curiosities [lining the dean's study]. In the study of them you will find, as I believe more and more daily, a mental discipline superior to that which language or mathematics can give. (p. 165)

The dean's scientific preferences are compatible with the novel's own, which tally, in turn, with those of William Farr: mathematics will take the social project only so far but narration and direct contact with the realities of life is what teaches the most significant aspects. Like Farr, *Alton Locke* thus rejects the Malthusian approach. Speaking to a fellow-tailor and Chartist, Alton asks:

«Oh! Crossthwaite, are children not a blessing?»  
«[...] No, my lad. – Let those bring slaves into the world who will! I will never beget children to swell the numbers of those who are trampling each other down in the struggle for daily bread, to minister in in ever deepening poverty and misery to the rich man's luxury – perhaps his lust». (p. 112)

«Then you believe in the Malthusian doctrines?» Alton asks, not unreasonably: «I believe them to be an infernal lie, Alton Locke» (p. 112). Crossthwaite's Trade Unionism dictates that he should be alert to suffering and injustice as a collective grievance, yet any idea of privation as a collective desert is rejected firmly. The reason for this refusal is that, like Locke, Crossthwaite has seen and experienced individual instances of misery, and, typical of the radical orator, he relies upon stories in forming and understanding the problem and its solutions.

For Crossthwaite, the solution is to be found in Chartism, and Locke becomes convinced of the same after he encounters instances of suffering, like the two children he finds working as agricultural labourers. These «little half-starved shivering animals» are described in ways that appear to have some sensitivity to the medico-narrative way of understanding hunger:

As we came up to the fold, two little boys hailed us from the inside – two little wretches with blue noses and white cheeks, scarecrows of rags and patches. [...] They seemed too small for such exertion: their little hands were purple with chilblains, and they were so sorefooted they could

scarcely limp. I was surprised to find them at least three years older than their size and looks denoted, and still more surprised, too, to find that their salary for all this bitter exposure to the elements – such as I believe I could not have endured two days running – was the vast sum of one shilling a week each, Sundays included. (p. 257)

Other members of the agricultural class are then described:

I was struck with the wan, haggard look of all faces; their lack-lustre eyes and drooping lips, stooping shoulders, heavy, dragging steps, gave them a crushed, dogged air, which was infinitely painful, and bespoke a grade of misery [that was] habitual and degrading. (p. 259)

The development of a viewpoint showing sympathy and affection relies upon both a glimpse into the inward trials and struggles of the poor and a way of looking that is concerned with physiological effects; the wan look, the pinched features, the drooping and stooping, all symbolise an understanding of the material and the emotive nature of working-class abjection.

As with most accounts of workers' agitation in Social Problem Fiction, *Alton Locke* condemns political uprising; indeed, in line with Kingsley's Christian Socialism, the novel suggests a need to find solutions in kinship, peace, and re-acquaintance with the teachings of Christ. Yet, whatever solution *Alton Locke* offers, it must be constructed on an impure aesthetics influenced by the contest between Poor Law advocates like Edwin Chadwick, who believed in a statistical solution to the problem, and men like Farr, who understood that the issue also needed experience, observation, and the gloss of narrative to express its full impact and range of possible solutions. Unsurprisingly, Kingsley's bias swung heavily in favour of the latter, yet his work demonstrates the need to respond to the former – if only to reject its most positivist manifestations. Social problem fiction like Kingsley's explored the possibility of balance between narrative, sympathy-laden representations of hunger and the proactive, material aspects of modern science.

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**«The mind washes its hands in a basin»****Walter Bagehot's Literary Essays  
and Impure Criticism**

Silvana Colella

(Università degli Studi di Macerata, Italia)

**Abstract** Bagehot's literary essays provide fertile ground for the exploration of mid-Victorian negotiations with notions of aesthetic impurity. Bagehot looked at the increasing democratization of culture and the changing habits of readers with more excitement than apprehension. His critical perspective was predicated not on an elitist form of detachment from the unrefined philosophies of the commercial classes, but on a kind of respectful proximity to the practicalities that affected the life of what he called the «transacting and trading multitude». In order to bring literature to business, Bagehot brought business into literature. His stance lacks purity and solemnity: standards of value imported from the business sphere co-habit with more traditional notions of aesthetic excellence; a mixture of high-brow and middle-brow concerns inspires his assessments of literary works. As this article demonstrates, Bagehot's criticism thrives on an impure and sometimes awkward combination of aesthetic and business values.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Critic and the Broker. – 3 An Experiencing Nature. – 4 Conclusion.

**Keywords** Criticism. Economics. Literary essays. Walter Bagehot.

The soul ties its shoe; the mind washes its hands in a basin. All  
is incongruous.

(Walter Bagehot)

**1 Introduction**

The list of possible candidates to the title of «the greatest Victorian», compiled by George M. Young in 1937, includes the eminent names of Karl Marx, George Eliot, Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Charles Darwin, and John Ruskin (Young 1937, p. 1137). After briefly summing up their credentials, Young awards the honour to none other than Walter Bagehot, «a man not too illustrious or too consummate to be companionable, but one, nevertheless, whose ideas took root and are still bearing» (p. 1138). The «robust and masculine sanity» of Victorian civilization, Young avers, finds its most eloquent expression in Bagehot's style of essay writing (p. 1138).

Posterity has not endorsed Young's idiosyncratic judgment. With the notable exception of *Lombard Street* (1873) and *The English Constitution* (1867), still rated as classics by monetary economists and legal theorists respectively, Bagehot's works have elicited scant attention. In his book-length study, *The Case of Walter Bagehot* (1972), C.H. Sisson revisits the essays of «the greatest Victorian» mainly to expose the alleged vulgarity of his thought: his «more refined ideas», Sisson argues, «are of an extraordinary vulgarity. He talks of the greatest artists as showing 'an enthusiasm for reality'» (Sisson 1972, p. 42). Why this enthusiasm should be deemed symptomatic of vulgarity depends on Sisson's pronounced distaste for Bagehot's notion of reality, punctuated as it is by copious references to the world of money matters. These references appear all the more insidious when they crop up in the literary essays, «putting at the centre of the intellectual stage what belongs to the periphery» (p. 41). Sisson repeatedly condemns the effrontery of the «mere man of affairs» (p. 41), the banker or the economist, who trespasses upon the preserves of specialists, criticizing Bagehot for his incapacity to appreciate a purely aesthetic experience. In Sisson's understanding, the literary man and the banker, the critic and the economist, should not be trading partners in the intellectual arena.

Yet for late Victorian and early twentieth-century readers, it was precisely Bagehot's effortless mingling of aesthetic, economic and political perspectives that qualified his impure prose as an accomplished intellectual achievement. Richard Holt Hutton praised Bagehot's «excursive imagination» which, he claimed, added «lucidity and caution» to his writing (Hutton 1891, vol. 1, p. xxvi). The American biographer, William Irvine, was even more explicit in his appreciation of the many-sided approach favoured in the literary essays: «Bagehot brought to the study of literature almost every species of equipment but that of the literary historian [...] the result is that his essays seem to have an added dimension. [...] He writes with the ready confidence and easy adaptability of one who is accustomed to assume many points of view, to be at home in a great variety of surroundings» (Irvine 1939, pp. 164-165). Bagehot's economic writings have also been valued for their literary finish: *Lombard Street*, Forrest Morgan claimed, reads like a novel (Morgan 1891, vol. 1, p. xxi); «it is not necessary to understand it much» – John Maynard Keynes famously observed – «in order to enjoy it a good deal» (Keynes 1915, p. 371). The most recent publication that engages with the works of the Victorian polymath, Prochaska's *The Memoirs of Walter Bagehot* (2013), pays tribute in its very shape to the hybrid style of intellectual discourse for which Bagehot has been alternatively commended and attacked. The book is a collage of unmarked extracts from Bagehot's writings framed as a faux autobiography; it is a literary experiment in «historical reconstruction» (Prochaska 2013, p. ix) that blurs the boundaries between memoir, biography and fiction. In the hybrid shape of Prochaska-Bagehot's memoir one can detect a rever-

beration of the taste for the impure that marks the dialogic prose of the Victorian critic, political analyst and economist – a prose often considered «difficult to categorize» (Kimball 2002, p. 52).

Though largely unread today, Bagehot's literary essays provide fertile ground for the exploration of mid-Victorian negotiations with notions of aesthetic impurity.<sup>1</sup> There is no systematic theory of literature at work in these essays. The attempt to formulate a theory of the «literesque», in the 1864 article on Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson, has failed to convince even the most admiring of his critics.<sup>2</sup> It is not Bagehot's conceptualization of literary purity (or its opposite), but the cultivation of an impure critical stance in his literary essays that is worthy of closer scrutiny. Biographical explanations have been adduced to account for Bagehot's peculiar critical angle. He wrote the majority of his literary essays while training and working as a banker, immersed in double-entry book-keeping during the day but devoted to literature in the evenings. Written in the intervals of business, Bagehot's literary essays – so the argument goes – bear the impress of his occupation: he speaks like a banker with a keen eye for the practical details of mercantile life.<sup>3</sup>

There is some truth in this explanation, but the line of thinking I would like to pursue places Bagehot more squarely in the context of Victorian print culture as an organic intellectual who did not shy away from the task of orienting the cultural tastes of the middle classes and of the business community in particular. Unlike Matthew Arnold, Bagehot was relatively unperturbed by the Philistinism of his contemporaries: «I think a man ought to be able to be a 'Philistine' if he chooses», he writes in the essay on Crabb Robinson, «there is a sickly incompleteness about people too fine for the world, and too nice to work their way in it» (St John-Stevas 1968, vol. 4, p. 487). Bagehot looked at the increasing democratization of culture and the changing habits of readers with more excitement than apprehension. Accordingly, his critical perspective was predicated not on an elitist form of detachment from the unrefined, materialistic or even vulgar philosophies of the commercial classes, but on a kind of empathic and respectful proximity to the practicalities that affected the life of the «transacting and trading multitude».<sup>4</sup> In order to bring literature to business, Bagehot brought

1 It is safe to assume that, unlike *Lombard Street*, the literary essays are not widely known today – hence my choice to include extended quotations from Bagehot's texts.

2 Irvine, for instance, speaks of the «narrowness of [Bagehot's] formula» (Irvine 1939, p. 97) when discussing his distinction between «pure», «ornate» and «grotesque» poetry. See St John-Stevas (1965, vol. 2, pp. 318-366).

3 See Irvine (1939) and Buchan (1959, p. 76).

4 This definition of the industrious middle classes appears in Bagehot's 1856 essay «The Character of Sir Robert Peel»: «In his later career, the second Sir Robert Peel was the statesman who most completely and thoroughly expressed the sentiments of this new dynasty; – in-

business into literature. His stance lacks purity and solemnity: standards of value imported from the business sphere co-habit with more traditional notions of aesthetic excellence; a mixture of high-brow and middle-brow concerns inspires his assessments of literary works; genius is less a question of originality than of «sagacity», a quintessentially mercantile virtue. In other words, Bagehot's criticism thrives on an impure and sometimes awkward combination of aesthetic and business values, as I argue in this essay. Whether or not this contamination produces valuable and enduring insights, it certainly suggests a willingness to explore the contact zones between high and low, élite and popular taste, the purity of art and the impurity of life which sits uneasily with the Arnoldian paradigm of disinterestedness.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 The Critic and the Broker

In a letter written when he was familiarizing himself with the solemn art of double-entry bookkeeping, Bagehot reports: «I have hunting, banking, shipping, publishers, an article, and a Christmas to do, all at once, and it is my opinion they will all get muddled. A muddle will print, however, though it will not add up – *which is the real advantage of literature*» (as quoted in Buchan 1959, p. 76). Compared to the exactness demanded in a counting-house, the study of literature held a special attraction: it made more sense than figures and numbers. In the 1850s, before he devoted himself almost exclusively to economics, banking and political journalism, Bagehot was an intellectual commuter between the commercial sphere and what he called «the *optional* world of literature» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 2, p. 293). To a certain extent, he embodied the Victorian ideal of the man of business who fruitfully employs his spare time in intellectual, contemplative pursuits. This ideal was promoted in the pages of the periodical press, in the commercial biographies of notable merchants, and in the manuals of business etiquette addressed to young minds desirous of self-improvement.<sup>6</sup> Bagehot took this ideal one step further. Taking advantage of the new opportunities opening up in the burgeoning market for periodical publica-

stead of being the nominee of a nobility, he became the representative of a transacting and trading multitude» (St John-Stevas 1968, vol. 3, p. 251).

5 Arnold speaks of «disinterested endeavour» in «The Function of Criticism at the Present Time» (1864): «Here, in general, its course is determined for it by the idea which is the law of its being: the idea of a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas» (Super 1962, p. 282).

6 See Anon. (1861); Freedly (1853); Hunt (1856) and Lyndall (1854). In these and other self-help manuals, the successful man of business is depicted as an individual who *does not* devote his life exclusively to pecuniary pursuits. See Colella (2013).

tions, he plunged into literary criticism with the zeal and enthusiasm of a neophyte. As Leslie Stephen later observed, he wrote of Shakespeare and Milton «as if he had discovered them for the first time» (Stephen 1907, p. 154). The impression of «freshness» to which Stephen and other readers responded (positively or not) is contingent upon two features of Bagehot's critical style: the lack of a systematic theory, compensated in part by the «duomania» – the love of contrasts and paradoxes – for which his criticism is mostly remembered today;<sup>7</sup> and the frequent tendency to deviate from art to life, or to consider aesthetic questions not in themselves, but in relation to the broader realm of practical, even ordinary concerns. Whether these concerns are those of the author whose works Bagehot is reviewing, or of the reader often imagined as a fellow businessman, they play no negligible role in Bagehot's understanding of the function of literature and criticism in mid-Victorian England.

In his capacity as literary critic, Bagehot takes great pleasure in opposing to the orderly realm of abstractions the messier, more impure realities of commerce and business of which he commanded an impressive knowledge. In some cases, this knowledge provides striking analogies or comparisons that serve to test the greatness of literature (novels, poetry, history) in relation to the nether regions of pecuniary matters. In other cases, the very idea of «experience» – often conceived as a state of intense bonding with the outside world – comes to be fetishized as the ultimate yardstick deployed to assess the art of Shakespeare, for instance, or Thomas Babington Macaulay's narrative style. In general, the brave new world of commercial and financial modernity, in which Bagehot was making steady progress in the mid 1850s, acts as a counterpoise to the self-referential proclivities of literary criticism. The idea of literature that he encourages readers to entertain is one that courts a direct contact with the muddle of contemporary life and the uncertainties of history. The quality he most appreciates is the author's ability to take stock, with various degrees of success, of the «tumult of change», the «gradations of doubt» and the disorder of «experience» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 1, p. 425). This ability, he argues, ensures the afterlife of words: «A *casual* character, so to speak, is natural to the most intense words: externally, even, they will interest the 'after world' more for having interested the present world; they must have a life of *some* place and *some* time before they can have one of all space and all time» (p. 403). One may not agree with Bagehot's final assessments or with his more tendentious judgments, but his critical stance is undoubtedly a singular example of cross-fertilization between aesthetic and commercial interests.

7 Irvine defines as «duomania» Bagehot's «strange fascination in making dichotomies» (Irvine 1939, p. 111).

This impure perspective can best be understood in relation to mid-Victorian print culture and the material conditions of production of the literary essays he published between 1852 and 1858, from the time he entered business up until his marriage. The essays were mainly written for the *Prospective Review*, a liberal Unitarian quarterly, and for its later incarnation, the *National Review*. The title word, 'prospective', «indicated a Unitarian interest in meditating upon change and continuity, and free inquiry as opposed to dogma» (Brake, Demoor 2009, p. 512) as the prefatory note to the first issue (February 1845) explained. Bagehot and his friend, Richard Holt Hutton, took up the editorship of the *National Review* in 1855 and strove to strike a new balance between the Unitarian tradition of the journal and the demands of a broader readership. The non-Unitarian Bagehot had a keen eye for these demands, which his essays contributed to shaping. Not exactly a democrat in politics, Bagehot nonetheless was suspicious of cultural elitism.<sup>8</sup> His literary criticism aims specifically to capture the attention of the «transacting and trading multitude» for which he showed great respect: «It is within the limit of what may be called malevolent sense», he argued in «Shakespeare - The Individual», «to take extreme and habitual pleasure in remarking the foolish opinions, the narrow notions, and fallacious deductions which seem to cling to the pompous and prosperous man of business» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 1, p. 205). To this malevolent prejudice - which Shakespeare is said to perpetrate - Bagehot opposed a degree of pride in the achievements of the bourgeoisie that surfaces in his writing whenever business values, the language of trade and the specific culture of the «buying and bargaining universe» (p. 311) are invoked to gauge literary and aesthetic matters. The review of Dinah Muloch Craik's novel *Lost and Won* is a good case in point. The article starts off with a comparison between the finely nuanced language of trade and the relatively scant vocabulary of literary criticism.

We have frequently had occasion to regret that the language of criticism is defective in terms to express the minor degrees of excellence in novel writing. The number of novels is so great, and the shades of merit are so many, that we need a finely pointed nomenclature. The language of trade is far more effective. It has very accurate, though often very odd words to distinguish the hundred sorts and qualities of the various articles of commerce; and it is especially copious in marking

8 As Gertrude Himmelfarb remarks: «More than any other political commentator or social critic, Bagehot persistently invoked such concepts as 'popular opinion', 'public opinion', 'the public mind', 'popular sentiment', 'popular imagination', the 'sense of the country'. And this not only in respect to the England of his own time, when it might be said that the common people were finally coming into their own as a power so that their opinions were becoming of some moment, but in respect to every other period and subject» (Himmelfarb 2006, p. 128).

the minute shades between 'middling' and 'good' which it is so difficult to distinguish sharply. There is one well-known commodity which, even in the printed circulars, has the six gradations of 'ordinary', 'middling', 'fair', 'good fair', 'good', and 'fine', besides others which we are told the oral language of the market would accurately define. No one believes that literary excellence has fewer shades of distinction than cotton, and yet how few are the words of the critic in comparison with those of the broker. (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 2, p. 151)

The trader who is conversant with commercial language and with the consensual «nomenclature» devised to standardize mercantile transactions may not have been the implied reader of Muloch Craik's domestic fiction. But that figure is Bagehot's ideal addressee, the imaginary interlocutor to whom the more conventional language of criticism might appear imprecise or vague. Bagehot's argument is straightforward in privileging the mercantile idiom: whereas the words of the broker effectively describe minute gradations of quality, to which the market assigns different prices, the language of criticism is surprisingly inadequate to discern different «shades of merit» and to formulate definitive judgments on subtle points of minor excellence. Yet the critic and the broker draw from the same fund of words, the same bank of English. The difference is that the mercantile community has devised a stable – conventional and consensual – set of meanings whereby to each shade of quality corresponds a different quantity of money. The critic cannot rely on a similar system: there is no subset of conventional signs indicating with precision how to classify the gradations of literary excellence. The point of this comparison is twofold: the language of trade is made to appear more sophisticated than literary criticism; by making this claim, Bagehot invites readers to appreciate not just high art but also the «middling» sort of aesthetic quality achieved by a growing number of novelists.

In *Genres of the Credit Economy*, Mary Poovey discusses the problems that nineteenth-century writers encountered in their «efforts to define a distinctively Literary form of value» (Poovey 2008, p. 285). Some of these problems descended from the Romantic definition of literary value that «made it difficult for authors of genres that were popular [...] to claim that their works were also valuable in aesthetic terms» (p. 285). Other controversial factors were related to the rivalry among «workers» in the literary field: «The contest over who would define the terms of Literary value», explains Poovey, «remained vigorous for most of the nineteenth century» (p. 301). Bagehot does not openly engage with this contest. Rather, he poses the question of value in relation to the variety of tastes that the burgeoning market for fiction was licensing. Not all novels have to be of the finest quality: there is a market for cotton of the «middling» sort just as there are readers willing to appreciate the «fine middling» quality of



Craik's novel. When it comes to defining what constitutes literary excellence in fiction, Bagehot adopts a liberal attitude: different shades of merit appeal to different tastes – a conclusion that may not have satisfied the advocates of pure taste, though it might have encountered the favour of less discerning readers.

These are the readers whom Bagehot imagines «[taking] their literature in morsels, as they take sandwiches on a journey» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 1, p. 310). «The First Edinburgh Reviewers», published in the *National Review* for October 1855, contains a sober assessment of the momentous changes occurring in the mid nineteenth-century field of cultural production – changes that include the upsurge of review-writing; the tangible increase in the output of books on every subject; the «smallness» of these books (slim, colourful, sold in railway stations); and the growing demand for culture of a growing constituency of readers «impatient of system, desirous of brevity, puzzled by formality» (p. 311). Bagehot redefines the task of the public intellectual bearing in mind that the «technicalities of scholars, or the fictions of recluse schoolmen» no longer appeal to the «taste of mankind»: «We must speak to the many so that they will listen, – that they will like to listen –, that they will understand. It is of no use addressing them with the forms of science, or the rigour of accuracy, or the tedium of exhaustive discussion» (p. 311).

These considerations help account for Bagehot's distinct preference for the essay form, or what he calls a «middle species of writing», poised halfway between «the light, frivolous style of merely amusing literature and the heavy conscientious elaborateness of methodical philosophy» (p. 323). Although by today's standards of brevity the 30,000-word articles published in the quarterlies hardly qualify as «morsels» of literature to be consumed hurriedly while commuting, the relative conciseness of the essay form appealed to Bagehot's critical imagination for its potential to reach «the many» and to instruct them in novel ways. Of course, «the many» he has in mind belong to a circumscribed social group; he calls them a «mass of sensible persons» (p. 313) by which he arguably means the middle classes and in particular the productive and industrious components of the bourgeoisie. When charting the transition from ancient to modern writing, from the ascetic, contemplative pursuits of the past to the more practical bent of the present, Bagehot selects the «merchant in the railways» as the representative type of modern reader:

What a transition from the student of former ages! – from a grave man, with grave cheeks and a considerate eye, who spends his life in study, has no interest in the outward world, hears nothing of its din, and cares nothing for its honours [...] to the merchant in the railways, with a head full of sums, an idea that tallow is 'up', a conviction that teas are 'lively', and a mind reverting perpetually from the little volume which he reads

to these mundane topics, to the railway, to the shares, to the buying and bargaining universe. (pp. 310-311)

What would be the style of writing best suited to communicate effectively with this imagined reader, easily distracted by share prices yet nursing a moderate thirst for knowledge? An impure style of writing: «glancing lightly from topic to topic, suggesting deep things in jest, unfolding unanswerable arguments in an absurd illustration»; «fragmentary», «allusive», «disconnected» yet managing to convey «the lessons of a wider experience» (p. 312). As several critics have noted, Bagehot's review writing comes close to this model. What needs emphasizing is how the «buying and bargaining universe» pushes at the margins of his vision and colours his understanding of literature. Wishing to speak to the many, to the busy «mass of sensible persons», Bagehot includes regular signposts or rhetorical pointers to what he considers their specific area of expertise. The habit of importing from the commercial sphere concepts and notions not customarily deployed to assess literary value appears, for instance, in his discussion of Edward Gibbon and of «the immensity of pure business» facing every historian who tries to compile a long narrative out of scattered fragments of uncatalogued materials. The historian who achieves the mastery of «a great narrator» is compared to the accountant who «takes up a bankrupt's books filled with confused statements of ephemeral events, the disorderly records of unprofitable speculations, and charges this to that head, and that to this – estimates earnings, specifies expenses, demonstrates failures» (p. 381). The model of balanced rationality that double-entry bookkeeping provides is here invoked to describe both the laboriousness of the effort and the clarity of the final result. Historical narration, like accounting, creates order out of chaos – though an excess of order, as Bagehot argues with reference to Macaulay, will jeopardize the truthfulness of the narrative.

Comparing history writing to accountancy is one thing; assessing the value of realistic representation according to its ability to capture «the talent which sells figs well» is something altogether more partisan (St John-Stevas 1965, vol. 2, p. 85). In his controversial essay on Charles Dickens, Bagehot serves an ideological agenda, presenting that «talent» as an intellectual achievement. Like Shakespeare and Walter Scott, Dickens is praised for the «marvelous popularity» of his works among all social classes, at home and abroad. Bagehot classifies Dickens's genius as «irregular and asymmetrical» (p. 79) and appreciates «the telling power of minute circumstantiality» (p. 84) exemplified in his novels, as well as the variety and range of subject matter. Defective, however, is Dickens's treatment of the «business of life»:

The most remarkable deficiency in modern fiction is its omission of the business of life, all of those countless occupations, pursuits, and callings in which most men live and move, and by which they have their being. In most novels money *grows*. You have no idea of the toil, the patience, and the wearing anxiety by which men of action provide for the day, and lay up for the future, and support those that are given into their care. Mr. Dickens is not chargeable with this omission. He perpetually deals with the pecuniary part of life [...] But, although his creative power lives and works among the middle class and industrial section of English society, he has never painted the highest part of their intellectual life. He made, indeed, an attempt to paint specimens of the apt and able man of business in *Nicholas Nickleby*; but the Messrs. Cheeryble are among the stupidest of his characters. He forgot that breadth of platitude is rather different from breadth of sagacity. His delineations of middle-class life have in consequence a harshness and meanness which do not belong to that life in reality. He omits the relieving element. He describes the figs that are sold, but not the talent which sells figs well. And it is the same want of diffused sagacity in its own nature which has made his pictures of life so odd and disjointed, and which has deprived them of symmetry and unity. (p. 85)

There are some noteworthy points in this passage, first of all the idea that the business of life – the sphere of work and money-making – should be granted a different, more respectful type of recognition by modern authors. Realism has always been criticized for its omissions. But Bagehot's argument is more specific. What Dickens's microscopic realism leaves out is the «relieving element» of bourgeois life, the «highest part of [the] intellectual life» of the middle class that Bagehot sums up as «the talent which sells figs well».<sup>9</sup> Dickens's art is evaluated by redefining what should count as truly representative of bourgeois life: «sagacity» not «platitude», the ability to sell not the inventory of commodities produced. Neither degrading nor vulgar, this talent is presented as an intellectual attribute, a quality of the mind that distinguishes the man of action from other social types. Thus reframed, the ability to sell acquires a higher status in terms of cultural respectability. Bagehot's literary judgments are often grounded in a system of values in which the mercantile component comes to occupy centre stage. They are informed by the attempt to intellectualize the commercial life of the bourgeoisie by turning business ideals into cultural benchmarks.

<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Deirdre McCloskey has recently argued for a thorough reassessment of the role played by «habits of the mind» and «habits of the lip» in the history of economic development, assigning to «bourgeois dignity» a crucial role as a factor of innovation (McCloskey 2010, pp. 6-9).

The term «sagacity», for instance, is a keyword in Bagehot's critical vocabulary: it indicates the prudence and judiciousness of men of business and has a positive aura of meaning. In the business world, «everything depends on the correctness of unseen decisions, on the secret sagacity of the determining mind», Bagehot states in *Economic Studies* (St. John-Stevas 1978, vol. 11, p. 264). In the essay on Dickens, sagacity acquires an aesthetic function; it is invoked to explain the difference between a «picturesque imagination» and the ability to subsume details into a «crystalline finish»: «a detective ingenuity in microscopic detail is of all mental qualities most unlike the broad sagacity by which the greater painters of human affairs have unintentionally stamped the mark of unity on their productions» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 2, p. 84). Translated into literary terms, the ability to settle what commodities shall be produced and marketed corresponds to the artist's skill in taking correct decisions about what best serves the purpose of aesthetic unity. As Harry Sullivan maintains, «Bagehot is not at all a literary critic in the sense of one who works out an elaborate methodology» (Sullivan 1975, p. 62). He lacks the special knowledge of the expert and «looks upon literature as a man primarily interested in the wider problems of the life and character which literature reflects» as Leslie Stephen observed (Stephen 1907, p. 153). This broader focus renders Bagehot's critical angle less specific and more attuned to the passions and the interests of the business community that he imagined desirous of some forms of cultural recognition. Hence the frequent references to the language of trade, the ability to sell, the sagacity of practical men which crop up in his discussions of literature – references that would arguably appeal to that segment of the community of readers most likely to recognize them as integral to their way of life. Bagehot's mixed approach to the study of literature opens up a space in-between, a common middle ground, where the critic and the broker, the literary man and the man of business, are encouraged to exchange insights.

### 3 An Experiencing Nature

One effect of this rhetorical strategy is to confer a higher degree of cultural prestige on the «buying and bargaining universe» – an entity more often associated with materialistic aims and unrefined aspirations in the perception of mid-Victorian literati (cf. Michie 2011). Another effect is to downplay the notion of aesthetic autonomy – «a form of value grounded entirely in itself» (Eagleton 1990, p. 65) – by measuring literary achievements according to the degree of distance or proximity between art and life, words and experience. This is most evident in two articles, «Shakespeare – The Individual» and «Mr. Macaulay», published respectively in 1853 and 1856. The leading aesthetic criterion guiding Bagehot's evaluation is the artist's

ability to appreciate «mere clay»: «What is wanted», Bagehot confidently states, «is to be able to appreciate mere clay, – which mere mind never will» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 1, p. 187). While Shakespeare possessed «an experiencing nature» and was deeply immersed in the turbulent scene of his time, Robert Southey, William Hazlitt and even Goethe exemplify a model of aloofness and abstraction that Bagehot finds decidedly unfruitful: «secluded habits do not tend to eloquence; and the indifferent apathy which is so common in studious persons is exceedingly unfavourable to the liveliness of narration and illustration which is needed for excellence in even the simple sorts of writing» (p. 185). Privileging action over contemplation, the excitement and challenges of being «immersed in matter» over the uneventful life of an «author who has always lived in a room» (p. 184), Bagehot inverts the positive and negative poles of the dichotomy that Hazlitt had posited in his 1821 essay «On Thought and Action» where he stated: «Some men are mere machines. They are put in a go-cart of business, and are harnessed to a profession – yoked to fortune's wheels. They plod on, and succeed. Their affairs conduct them, not they their affairs» (Hazlitt 1821, p. 239). To Hazlitt's distinction between lofty and material pursuits, Bagehot responds with a decided investment in the value of experience and *vita activa*, imagining the life of the merchant as paradigmatic of «action» in the modern sense. While a «merchant must meet his bills or he is civilly dead and uncivilly remembered», studious persons «have nothing to rouse them from an indolent and musing dream» (St. John-Stevas 1965, vol. 1, p. 185). In a truly partisan spirit, sounding a note of mild anti-intellectualism, Bagehot celebrates Shakespeare as a «monied man», successful in art as well as in business: «it was a great thing that he, the son of the wool-comber, the poacher, the good-for-nothing, the vagabond [...] should return upon the old scene a substantial man, a person of capital, a freeholder, a gentleman to be respected» (p. 213). There is only one dent in this laudatory picture of the bard as bourgeois role model: Shakespeare's «contempt for the perspicacity of the *bourgeoisie*» or his disbelief in the middle classes. «If you are the Chancellor of the Exchequer», Bagehot observes, «it is possible that you may be acquainted with finance; but if you sell Figs it is certain that you will. Now we nowhere find this laid down in Shakespeare. On the contrary, you will generally find that when a 'citizen' is mentioned, he generally does or say something absurd» (p. 204).

If «Shakespeare – The Individual» is emblematic of the extent to which Bagehot is willing to go in order to take into account the *Weltanschauung* of what he calls the «pecuniary classes» (p. 204), the article on Thomas Babington Macaulay provides one further instance of Bagehot's impatience with the purity of a life of contemplation, unsullied by contact with the passions and doubts that animate and beset most people. Macaulay is said to possess an «inexperiencing» nature and his style of narration

is criticized for being «too omniscient» (p. 425) or partially blind to the uncertainties and improbabilities that render the data of history a «heap of confusion» (p. 425). Once again, the standard in relation to which omniscience is gauged derives from the habits of those who are most familiar with the «business of risk». «Life is a school of probability», Bagehot avers:

In the writings of every man of patient practicality, in the midst of whatever other defects, you will find a careful appreciation of the degrees of likelihood; a steady balancing of them one against another; a disinclination to make things too clear, to overlook the debit side of the account in mere contemplation of the enormousness of the credit. The reason is obvious: action is a business of risk; the real question is the magnitude of that risk. Failure is ever impending; success is ever uncertain [...] For practical men, the problem ever is to test the amount of these inevitable probabilities; to make sure that no one increases too far; that by a well-varied choice the number of risks may in itself be a protection – be an insurance to you, as it were, against the capricious result of any one. A man like Macaulay, who stands aloof from life, is not so instructed; he sits secure; nothing happens in his study: he does not care to test probabilities; he loses the detective sensation. (p. 426)

The experience of uncertainty in trade; the continuous balancing of probabilities; the risk-calculating propensity of «men of patient practicality»; the capriciousness of success and failure: these are all constituent features of the wisdom of business that Bagehot brings to bear on aesthetic matters. In Macaulay's style of narration «all is clear; nothing is doubtful» (p. 425). Enjoyable though his books are – they read «like an elastic dream» (p. 422) – they fall short of communicating through form «the confusion of life» (p. 425). An excess of aesthetic unity appears detrimental to the efficacy of history writing; the beautiful, orderly style of Macaulay's narratives, the purity of his omniscience, delivers partial truths.

Bagehot's incursions into the territory of literature reflect the self-congratulatory mood of the economically hegemonic middle classes in the decade of the Great Exhibition. It is significant that, in the examples I have illustrated, the representative habits of this stratified social group, from the ability to sell to the experience of uncertainty, inspire Bagehot's negative assessments of what novels, criticism or history fail to do. The shortcomings he detects are such in relation to standards ostensibly extraneous to the aesthetic sphere and germane to the business world. Bringing the two into closer contact was Bagehot's way of redressing the ideological divide between the utilitarian spirit and the aesthetic compensation to be found in art. A by-product of this attempt is the heightened cultural legitimacy conferred upon the world of trade, notoriously debased as materialistic and vulgar in much writing of the period. A banker by profession, Bagehot

belonged to the upper echelons of trade, not to its lower strata, and had enjoyed the benefits of a liberal education. He was therefore uniquely positioned to straddle two worlds. Even so, his mistrust of cultural elitism is noteworthy; it stands in sharp contrast to what, a few years later, Matthew Arnold would theorise. Some 'anarchy', Bagehot's essays suggest, is good for 'culture'; too much aloofness from the muddle of life produces words that do not live in their own time and forms of thought that eschew an open confrontation with the dirt and dust of the present. Though his suspicion of bookishness is questionable, Bagehot's critical stance bears witness to the fact that Victorian intellectuals were exploring more than one avenue in their attempt to come to terms with the unknown public of readers and their unrefined, impure taste.

#### 4 Conclusion

The first edition of Bagehot's collected works was published in 1889 not by a commercial or an academic press, but the Travellers Insurance Company – an American corporation that, in a moment of enlightened cultural awareness, invested in the preservation and dissemination of Bagehot's scattered contributions to British intellectual life. By the end of the nineteenth century, he was well-known for his interventions in the fields of economics, banking and politics, while the literary essays, reprinted in a volume in 1858 (*Estimates of Some Englishmen and Scotchmen*), had not aged quite as gracefully. In the light of this, the company's decision to issue Bagehot's collected works appears less whimsical; it was presumably motivated by the desire to divulge his reflections on men and money.

It is interesting to note, however, that this work of preservation also entailed substantial editorial interventions aimed at pruning and straightening what appeared as a distinctly impure writing style. In the prefatory note, an exasperated editor, Forrest Morgan, recounts his struggles to purify Bagehot's unruly prose, harness the «atrocities» of his syntax, rectify mistaken quotations and ensure some linguistic coherence: «No writer of eminence in modern times» – the editor claims – «has treated so defiantly the primary grammatical rules of the English language, or the first principles of construction in any language» (Morgan 1891, vol. 1, p. v). In the perception of this zealous but admiring editor, Bagehot's prose is rebellious, chafing at the limitations of grammar or at the rules of eloquence then prevailing; a prose dotted with irregularities and marked by syntactical entanglements that the editor attributed to Bagehot's familiarity with «business talk»: «he was a business man, and he is an adept at 'business talk' as frequently heard among that class of men – perfectly lucid as to matter and perfectly incoherent as to structure» (p. v). In a final moment of appreciation, Forrest Morgan describes *Lombard Street* as a unique



example of «the triumph of style over matter» – the book is «as solid as a market report and more charming than a novel» (p. xxi).

Today's readers may not find Bagehot's theory of banking as enticing as a novel. But it is significant that his historical readers, up until the early twentieth century, were fascinated by Bagehot's «excursive imagination» or by the facility with which he traversed disciplinary boundaries that were not yet rigidly defined. If his prose appeared stained by an excess of irregularities, his cross-disciplinarity was more likely to be commended than condemned. In this article, I have focused on Bagehot's rhetorical strategies arguing that his repeated intermingling of business and literature, commercial language and aesthetic considerations can best be apprehended in relation to the changes then occurring in the field of cultural production – changes that Bagehot himself had observed, commented on and factored in in his essays. The diffusion of periodical publications, the power of the press to reach a diversified multitude of readers was a relatively novel phenomenon at mid century. To this Bagehot responded with an increased awareness of the important cultural tasks performed by critics, reviewers, editors and essay writers. Not speaking as a specialist, he addressed himself preferably to a specific group of readers – the «men of patient practicality», the «sensible persons», the «merchant in the railways with a head full of sums» – whom he interpellated through frequent appeals to their habits, values, and convictions, or to what he imagined as such. The skewed critical angle Bagehot adopts in the literary essays suggests a desire to reach these readers in an idiom calculated to inspire some respect for the «transacting and trading multitude» – an economically hegemonic group, but one disenfranchised at the symbolic level by the resiliency of gentry values, the British culture of prestige and its anti-business bias. Bagehot's vision of literature and criticism, predicated on the trading of insights between the critic and the broker, testifies to the diversified ideological agenda of Victorian intellectuals: some of them, like Arnold, inclined towards the cultivation of detachment, others, like Bagehot were more attuned to the demands for cultural recognition of the trading community. Arnold's position has gone down well in history, Bagehot's less so. The mechanisms of selection that preside over the transmission of cultural heritage (broadly understood) have tended to favour specialisms and the patrolling of disciplinary borders – a process that was already underway when Bagehot was honing his critical skills. Today, however, the relaxing of disciplinary boundaries is back on the agenda, as the work done in the field of the New Economic Criticism attests. Economists too have caught this drift: in his impressively documented exposé of inequality under capitalism, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), Thomas Piketty recruits Jane Austen, Balzac, and Zola to further illustrate his point, showing that the wisdom of fiction was far-sighted. More provocatively, Deirdre McCloskey has recently theorized what she terms «humanomics»,

a «humanistic science of the economy» that values cultural attitudes as determining factors of economic life (McCloskey 2010, p. 9). «The world is too much divided», declared Bagehot in 1876, «between economists, who think only of 'wealth', and sentimentalists, who are never so sure they are right as when they differ from what political economy teaches» (St. John-Stevas 1968, vol. 3, p. 118). Bringing these two camps into closer contact is still an issue today.

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## Fact and Taste

### Thematic and Metaliterary Impurity in *Hard Times*

Saverio Tomaiuolo

(Università degli Studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale, Italia)

**Abstract** *Hard Times* is an example of Dickens's desire to create a narrative hybrid, composed – as it is – of different literary genres and styles. Nevertheless, the carnivalesque nature of the circus, which epitomises the transgression of social and cultural norms, is not to be intended as a negation of those social and family principles that Dickens's novel advocates against the disruptive utilitarian politics. This textual impurity inevitably affects and determines the ideological complexity of a work that can be only superficially classified as a realistic factory novel. Thomas Gradgrind's and Mr. Sleary's different uses of language, for instance, embody their adherence to (the facts), or their infraction of («People must be amused») specific ideological norms. In Dickens's view, it is exactly through their (apparent) negation that traditional Victorian values may be affirmed and consolidated thanks to a mutual form of cultural infection. At the same time, *Hard Times* may be approached as a metaliterary reflection on Dickens's role as a writer (and editor) in a particular phase of his career. In this respect, Sleary, the creative artist, and Gradgrind, the factual Victorian paterfamilias, represent two facets of Dickens's own personality.

**Keywords** Charles Dickens. Circus. Dialogism. *Hard Times*.

*Hard Times* (1854) is a difficult novel to classify, and defies any easy categorization amidst Dickens's works. Since F.R. Leavis's reflections in *The Great Tradition* (1948) on the peculiarity of *Hard Times* in Dickens's artistic production – a «moral fable» that has «all the strengths of his genius» and the status of «a completely serious work of art» (Leavis 1972, p. 258) – there has been a constant interrogation of its nature. This lack of critical agreement derives from its elusiveness with regard to literary genres, narrative construction and characterization. Whereas aesthetic impurity may be considered a recurring feature in Dickens's macrotext – characterized as it is by a constant mingling of the tragic and the comic, of high and low literary sources, of idealizing and crude representation, and of a metaphorically refined use of language and of colloquialisms – *Hard Times* gives the impression of including this principle of impurity not just as one of many elements but as the thematic and formal foundation of the novel. Although it retains some of the lugubrious atmosphere of *Bleak House*, the novel that was published before it, *Hard Times* does not possess anything like the narrative *tour-de-force* and plotting intricacies of

*Bleak House*. Indeed, *Hard Times* seems to be written against the grain of its illustrious predecessor, being decisively more compact in shape and size than *Bleak House*. Even though it bears witness to Dickens's attempt to set his narrative in a specific context (as he does in *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*), *Hard Times* cannot be reductively described as a historical, factory (or social) novel. Moreover, Dickens's text is less focused on topical issues than, say, *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*.<sup>1</sup> Finally, whereas *Hard Times* does not explicitly draw from the writer's biography (as do *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*), it does contain some of Dickens's most personal and intimate reflections on the uses of imagination and fancy in dealing with factual questions, as well as with the artist's complex role.<sup>2</sup>

*Hard Times* therefore stands in a peculiar position in Dickens's macro-text from both a thematical-ideological and a formal point of view. With respect to its formal features, it seems constructed as a hybrid assemblage of contrasting styles. Equally heterogeneous is the range of the ideological frames or the «ideologemes», in Mikhail Bakhtin's definition (Holquist 1981, p. 357), of the various characters involved in the story. If the presence of circus folks reveals Dickens's peculiar interest in using an inventive and creative language (in particular as regards Sleary's lisp) and in idiosyncratic characterization, the novel's references to social issues (mainly embodied by Stephen Blackpool) downplay some of its comic premises, and complicate its ideological background. Accordingly, the formal and ideological aspects of *Hard Times* are not separated from one another. The aesthetically impure quality of the form that contains so much comic entertainment serves indeed to convey its complex message. The aesthetic principle that underlies the comic becomes a vehicle for proposing subversive meanings, according to a practice that Hugh Grady has described well: «[precisely] because of [its] special status», Grady argues, «[...] the aesthetic becomes an arena for all kinds of 'dangerous' material, but it achieves its license to do so because it is socially constituted as harmless, playful, dreamlike» (Grady 2009, p. 29). And it is certainly this formal impurity in mixing the comical and the dangerous that continues to puzzle and attract readers and critics.

1 Hilary Schor maintains that «[d]espite a flurry of scholarly articles connecting *Hard Times* to the Preston lock-out and other contemporary factory controversies, the novel in fact seems far less topical in its references than *Bleak House*, a novel completed the year before» (Schor 2001, p. 68).

2 *Hard Times* is obviously not the only novel to allude (directly or indirectly) to the figure of the artist, with examples ranging from *Bleak House* (for instance, Nemo as the unnamed creator of legal documents) to *Our Mutual Friend* (Silas Wegg, the ballad seller with a wooden leg) and *David Copperfield*, which may be reputed as the most extensive treatment of the role of the writer and the artist.

*Hard Times* provides an interesting access to a creative internal struggle experienced by Dickens, which concerned his job as a writer. Composed in an important phase of Dickens's emergence as a brand-name for Victorian novel-writing and editing, *Hard Times* may also be interpreted as an interrogation of the role of the nineteenth-century artist in the figures of Sleary, the embodiment of unbridled creativity, and of Thomas Gradgrind, the down-to-earth factual individual. The characters represent complementary facets of the same authorial persona. In this respect, along with its social and political references, Dickens's novel demonstrates a metaliterary drive centred on aesthetic and creative issues.

In a letter to Henry Cole, dated 17 June 1854 and written during the periodical publication of *Hard Times* in *Household Words*, Dickens reports his dialogues with Thomas Gradgrind, the novel's protagonist. The more he talks about this «man of realities» and of «fact and calculations» (Flint 1995, p. 10), the more it seems that Dickens is talking about himself as a writer, a journalist and an editor with multiple artistic and familial engagements:

I often say to Mr. Gradgrind that there is reason and good intention in much that he does – in fact, in all that he does – but that he over-does it. Perhaps by dint of his going his way and my going mine, we shall meet at least at some halfway house where there are flowers in the carpets, and a little standing room for Queen Mab's Chariot among the Steam Engines. (Hartley 2012, p. 276)

Along with the allusion to Queen Mab from *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 1, Scene iv), the sentence «there are flowers in the carpet» is an explicit reference to *Hard Times*, Chapter 2. After having offered through Bitzer his famous definition of a horse as «Quadruped. Gramnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive» (Flint 1995, p. 12), the novel's narrator introduces an unnamed third gentleman working as a government officer. This passage of *Hard Times*, to which Dickens's letter to Henry Cole alludes, is worth quoting at length:

«[...] What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact».

Thomas Gradgrind nodded his approbation.

«This is a new principle, a discovery, a great discovery», said the gentleman.

«Now, I'll try you again. Suppose you were going to carpet a room. Would you use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it?»

There being a general conviction by this time that «No, sir!» was always the right answer to this gentleman, the chorus of No was very strong. Only a few feeble stragglers said Yes: among them Sissy Jupe [...].



- «So you would carpet your room – or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband – with representations of flowers, would you?» said the gentleman. «Why would you?»
- «If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers», returned the girl
- «And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?»
- «It wouldn’t hurt them, sir. They wouldn’t crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy –».
- «Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy», cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. «That’s it! You are never to fancy».
- «You are not, Cecilia Jupe», Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, «to do anything of that kind».
- «Fact, fact, fact!» said the gentleman. And «Fact, fact, fact!» repeated Thomas Gradgrind [...].
- «You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don’t walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets [...]. You must use», said the gentleman, «for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste». (Flint 1995, pp. 13-14)

The «third gentleman» who discusses matters with Sissy may be eventually interpreted as a parody of Henry Cole, the director of the Department of Practical Art – the addressee of Dickens’s letter – who warmly supported the association between «taste» and factual rules. As a matter of fact, Cole and Dickens were on friendly terms and worked together on many occasions: for instance Cole gave Dickens information, which would be used in many articles published in *Household Words*, about abuse in the patenting system and about neglect in public records. Between the lines of his instructions to the Coketown schoolchildren, «the gentleman» (whose opinions are shared by Gradgrind, who nods «his approbation») illustrates his ideas about artistic expression, and in particular about realistic figuration. For him there has to be a relationship between aesthetic «taste» and mimetic factual representation («What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact»; «This is fact. This is taste»). Through him Dickens is denouncing a certain approach to scholastic education (and indirectly to its Utilitarian background) and, at the same time, he is introducing a subtle reflection on aesthetic issues. Sissy, who acts in the novel as a figure of mediation between fact and art, is the only character who takes a stand for and defends her opinions. According to «the gentleman», the leading characteristic for any product of art should be its mimetic congruity (to

avoid being «a contradiction in fact»), whereas for Sissy what matters is the mere enjoyment of it («I am fond of them»).

As the above-quoted excerpt from Dickens's novel indicates, notwithstanding its political and social topicality *Hard Times* cannot be interpreted merely as a realistic narrative; it is, rather, a text that turns into a reflection on the role and job of the Victorian artist, and on the factual and cultural implications of aesthetic principles. Dickens's implicit assumptions in *Hard Times* seem to anticipate Theodore W. Adorno's reflections, included in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), on the ir/rationality of the aesthetic, according to which «[art] is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it; art is not something prerational or irrational, which would peremptorily condemn it as untruth [...]. Rational and irrational theories of art are therefore equally faulty» (Adorno, Tiedemann 1997, p. 55). Dickens's letter to Henry Cole thus suggests that the author of *Hard Times* is talking about (and against) himself as a professional writer who was realising that his relationship with literature was becoming Gradgrindian (to the point of losing touch with the joy of creativity) in a particular phase of his career, during which his editorial, journalistic, and literary engagements were imposing on him an overly demanding working schedule. For this reason, *Hard Times* attempts to find a middle ground between artistic integrity and editorial politics, a middle ground where writing and duty «shall meet at last», as Dickens writes to Cole.<sup>3</sup>

The destiny of *Hard Times* is interlaced with *Household Words*, in which this novel appeared between 1 April and 12 August 1854, and with Dickens's own evolution as a literary lion. The genesis of the novel is concerned with hard economic facts, since Dickens was asked by Bradbury and Evens to start writing (and serializing) a new novel so as to improve the sales of *Household Words*, which were falling consistently. Once again, he had to reconcile facts with taste in an extremely busy period of his career. Nevertheless, «despite the fact that he had been exhausted to the point of collapse during the latter stages of *Bleak House*, he was ready to begin again» (Ackroyd 1990 p. 724). Even the editorial positioning of *Hard Times* in Dickens's weekly confirms the centrality of facts as a fundamental background to its arguments. The novel was printed alongside numerous articles on contemporary issues, many of them dealing with the supposedly abhorred statistics that Dickens repeatedly puts under question (and even ridicules) in *Hard Times*. This is one of the reasons why *Hard Times* cannot be reductively described as a mere attack upon factuality and Utilitarianism and upon the rising Victorian economical sciences. In fact, *Household Words* was a periodical meant to amuse peo-

3 In Katherine Kearn's words, *Hard Times* becomes «a parable of correlatives for the artist's impasse between duty and pleasure» (Kearns 1992, p. 859).

ple instructively through the inclusion of literary pieces and of articles on cogent questions, among which Dickens's own piece on the Preston strikes (published on 11 February 1854) that provided the source of inspiration for many descriptive sections of *Hard Times*. As evidence of Dickens's heterogeneous and impure taste, enhanced both by fact and fancy, there is the novelist's great admiration for Henry Thomas Buckley, the author of the unfinished *History of Civilization in England* (published in 2 volumes, out of the planned 14, between 1858 and 1861), a work that made extensive use of statistics, and whose writer was among the models for the creation of Gradgrind.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Frank Stone dated 30 May 1854, Dickens described Henry Thomas Buckley as a «perfect gulf of information» (Hogarth, Dickens 2011, p. 334). Yet Dickens had long been well aware of the paradoxes of statistical sciences, as evinced by one of his first journalistic pieces published in *Bentley's Miscellany*. The collection of articles known as *The Mudfog Papers* (1837) described the so-called «Mudfog Society for the Advancement of Everything», which was nothing but a parody of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

The ideological impurity of Dickens's extremely divided opinions on Utilitarianism and on statistical sciences informs many sections of *Hard Times* from a stylistic and formal point of view too. In some cases the representative of factual thought resorts to artistic expressions and literary metaphors that seem to contradict the premises of Utilitarian principles. A telling example is Thomas Gradgrind's opening speech, in which he illustrates his philosophy – juxtaposed to what would be described as «The Sleary philosophy» (Flint 1995, p. 47):

«NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!». (p. 9)

Gradgrind's talk includes multiple figures of speech: his use of a metaphor («Plant nothing else, and root out everything else»), of an epiphora («Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts») and a chiasmus («Facts alone are wanted in life [...]. Stick to facts, sir») contradicts his dislike for literary language, and for the «destructive nonsense» (p. 53), as he calls it, of stories about fairies, dwarves and genies. More-

4 Dickens's attacks against statistics were not indiscriminate; in Alexander Welsh's opinion «[like] most of his countrymen he admired, on the whole, the kind of investigation of the condition of England that was current and the way in which its results were tabulated» (Welsh 1986, p. 19).

over, Gradgrind's agricultural metaphor in his address to the schoolchildren in Coketown («root out») reminds readers of Dickens's use of this very figure of speech in «The Amusements of the People» (1850), one of the three articles he wrote for the first issue of *Household Words*, in which he clarifies the aims and scope of his new weekly. Whereas Charles Dickens's and Thomas Gradgrind's ideas diverge on many accounts, the Victorian novelist and the 'factual' Utilitarian sometimes (and unexpectedly) resort to the same rhetorical strategies:

It is probable that nothing will ever root out from among the common people an innate love they have for dramatic entertainment in some form or other. It would be a very doubtful benefit to society, we think, if it could be rooted out. (Dickens 1850b, p. 13)

In the same piece Dickens introduces the image of steam-engines as epitomes of a sterile and alienating expression of modernity, which will recur in *Hard Times* in the statement, «[there] is a range of imagination in most of us, which no amount of steam-engines will satisfy» (p. 13).

*Hard Times* was written under pressure during a period in which Dickens had to face the manifold commitments that his role as novelist and editor of the day entailed. The weekly format of *Household Words* represented, first and foremost, a great challenge for him. In order to maintain the crushing schedule, Dickens had to subject himself to hard times of self-discipline and to an almost industrial-like working plan. The terms and expressions adopted in one of his memoranda, written on a sheet of paper preserved in the manuscript of *Hard Times*, seem to anticipate Anthony Trollope's organization of his writing. As described in *An Autobiography* (1883), Trollope's schemes could also be called factual.<sup>5</sup> In similar terms, Dickens – who resembles Gradgrind too in being a man «of facts and calculations» – gives detailed information about how to adapt the monthly format of *Bleak House* to the weekly format of *Hard Times*:

5 «When I have commenced a new book, I have always prepared a diary, divided into weeks, and carried it on for the period which I have allowed myself for the completion of the work [...]. According to the circumstances of the time, – whether my other business might be then heavy or light, or whether the book which I was writing was or was not wanted with speed, – I have allotted myself so many pages a week. The average number has been about 40. It has been placed as low as 20, and has risen to 112. And as a page is an ambiguous term, my page has been made to contain 250 words; and as words, if not watched, will have a tendency to straggle, I have had every word counted as I went» (Sadleir, Page 1999, pp. 118-119).

One sheet (16 pages of *Bleak House*) will make ten pages and a quarter of *Household Words*. Fifteen pages of my writing, will make a sheet of *Bleak House*. A page and a half of my writing, will make a page of *Household Words*. A quantity of the story to be published weekly, being about five pages of *Household Words*, will require about seven pages and a half of my writing. (quoted in Butt, Tillotson 1957, p. 202)

Furthermore, in a letter to John Forster dated February 1854, Dickens describes the problems he had in adapting his writing methods to the weekly format, complaining that «[the] difficulty is CRUSHING. Nobody can have an idea of it who has not had an experience of patient fiction-writing with some elbow-room always, and open places in perspective» (Hartley 2012, p. 274).<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Dickens's weekly also provided the perfect editorial setting in which to manifest his passion for popular amusements and for fancy, a key term in *Hard Times*. In «A Preliminary Word», published in the first issue of his weekly along with «The Amusements of the People», Dickens offers the following definition of the human «light of Fancy»:

In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished. (Dickens 1850a, p. 1)

This excerpt highlights the didactic aspirations of *Household Words* to teach readers «nothing but facts» through the essential mediation of fancy. Through the description of the «light of Fancy» burning with «an inspiring flame», Dickens is anticipating, moreover, one of the most renowned scenes and metaphors of *Hard Times*, associated with Louisa Gradgrind's doomed passions: «there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression» (Flint 1995, p. 19).

In *Household Words*, and then in *Hard Times*, fancy becomes not just an evocative term, but a fundamental cultural, inventive, narrative and textual strategy through which the narrator counterbalances, and even integrates, the world of facts. In her study *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Martha C. Nussbaum describes (Dickens's) fancy as «the novel's name for the ability to see one thing as another, to see one thing

6 Dickens's letters testify, according to Lyn Cain, «in the most poignant terms to the abject misery that increasingly infiltrated his life and literary composition, hinting at periods of unimaginable anguish and pain under which he composed his novels, especially those of his middle and late periods» (Cain 2008, p. 5).

in another. We might therefore also call it the metaphorical imagination» (Nussbaum 1995, p. 36). This peculiar use of fancy explains and justifies the novel's idiosyncratic and hybrid imagery, characterized – among the other things – by a constant association between technology and the natural world (identified by exotic animals such as serpents and elephants), between the bleak Western industrial landscape of Coketown and Eastern fairy tales (Dickens's sources are mainly derived from *The Arabian Nights*). The stern M'Choakumchild, for instance, is described working at his preparatory lesson «not unlike Morgiana in the Forty Thieves: looking into all the vessels ranged before him, one after another, to see what they contained» (Flint 1995, p. 15). With a similar strategy, the unnatural red and black colour of Coketown is compared to «the painted face of a savage», with its steam-engines «like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness» (p. 28). In Chapter 10, the lights of great factories are «like Fairy palaces» (p. 69), while the chapter that follows includes a description of «the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown» (p. 73). In Book 2, Chapter 1, Coketown is again compared to a Fairy palace, although the atmosphere here is a terrifying one, reminiscent of a circle in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*:

The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. (p. 116)

Kate Flint notices other examples of ideological and formal impurity in the hybrid construction that make *Hard Times* peculiar in Dickens's canon. In the sections describing the childlike appearance of circus folks, she points out, Dickens resorts to the same expressions and rhetoric that he adopted in his *Household Words* article «On Strike» (devoted to the Preston strikes), although «on this occasion he was referring to the industrial workers» (p. 305). Coherently with this process of formal (and ideological) hybridization, the room of Mr. Gradgrind, a man who criticizes fables and fairy-tales, is ironically compared to Bluebeard's chamber because of «its abundance of blue books» (p. 98), namely of huge collections of statistics. By using such textual strategies, Dickens defies the expectations of those readers (and critics) who were looking for a traditional social-problem novel based on the model represented by Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), by Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), by Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845) or by Elizabeth Gaskell, whose *North and South* would be published soon after *Hard Times* in *Household Words* (from September 1854 to January 1855).

While drawing on a traditional association between circus life and crea-

tivity, Dickens's treatment of the circus people is particularly nuanced. Like that of the writer, the art of the circus depends, according to Efraim Sicher, «on skill as well as stratagem» (Sicher 2011, p. 321), and it represents an antithetical perspective to factual (Gradgrindian) thought. The Sleary circus identifies what Mikhail Bakhtin has defined as the carnivalesque element of culture. By way of its liberating use of body movement and its provocation of laughter, the circus questions the authority and the established order of factual thinking, as embodied by Gradgrind, Bounderby and Bitzer. Like the circus – through its momentary suspension of normative behaviours, of privileges, of rules and of the laws regulating the way humans (and animals) use and manage their bodies – the carnival is «the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal» (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10). By incarnating, moreover, a fanciful alternative to a Gradgrindian view of reality, the Sleary circus offers a model of family life and education that stands against Gradgrind's failing model.

In its depiction of the circus people *Hard Times* resorts to a grotesque filter that counterbalances Gradgrind's, Bounderby's and Bitzer's roles as factual characters. In the eyes of the narrator, the individuals working at Sleary's circus are culturally, bodily and linguistically alien, since they behave, move and speak in a non-normative way, using a peculiar linguistic code:

[Childers's] legs were very robust, but shorter than legs of good proportions should have been. His chest and back were as much too broad, as his legs were too short. He was dressed in a Newmarket coat and tight-fitting trousers; wore a shawl round his neck; smelt of lamp-oil, straw, orange-peel, horses' provender, and sawdust; and looked a most remarkable sort of Centaur, compounded of the stable and the playhouse. (Flint 1995, p. 35)

Both Mr. Childers and Master Kidderminster walked in a curious manner; with their legs wider apart than the general run of men, and with a very knowing assumption of being stiff in the knees. This walk was common to all the male members of Sleary's company, and was understood to express, that they were always on horseback. (p. 39)

Apart from their fanciful appearance, their alien nature and their peculiar job as entertainers, however, the circus folk also represents a close-knit community (or a social «symbol», according to Hillis Miller)<sup>7</sup> if compared to Gradgrind's crumbling household:

7 As Hillis J. Miller argues, «In *Hard Times* Dickens dramatizes in strikingly symbolic terms the opposition between a soul-destroying relation to a utilitarian, industrial civilization [...] and the reciprocal interchange of love». Therefore «the circus here is still only a symbol of a good *society*, that is, of communion around a third thing, the 'act'» (Miller 1969, p. 226).



[The] various members of Sleary's company gradually gathered together from the upper regions, where they were quartered, and, from standing about, talking in low voices to one another and to Mr. Childers, gradually insinuated themselves and him into the room. There were two or three handsome young women among them, with their two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of a third family often made a pyramid of both those fathers, with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. All the mothers could (and did) dance, upon the slack wire and the tight-rope, and perform rapid acts on bare-backed steeds [...]. Last of all appeared Mr. Sleary: a stout man as already mentioned, with one fixed eye, and one loose eye, a voice (if it can be called so) like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows, a flabby surface, and a muddled head which was never sober and never drunk. (p. 41)

The only character that does not fit well into the extended Sleary family is Signor Jupe, Sissy's father. A horse-trainer and circus performer, he decides to abandon his daughter because he feels unable to be of help to her in the future. As another complex fatherly figure, Signor Jupe becomes, along with Thomas Gradgrind, a biographical projection of Dickens's own difficulties in dealing with his family engagements, and in particular with his son Charley. Before and during the composition of *Hard Times*, Dickens's projects for Charley's future oscillated between idealistic hopes and Gradgrindian pragmatism.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the difficult relationship in *Hard Times* between Gradgrind and his two children reflects Dickens's fatherly worries and dissatisfaction. This biographical similarity is strengthened by the fact that, in the novel, Tom is named after Thomas Gradgrind, just as Charley Dickens is named after his father Charles.

Dickens's decision not to assign a major role to Signor Jupe in the story, and his description of him as a father-artist who abandons his only daugh-

<sup>8</sup> At first Dickens hoped that his son would take after him. For this reason, he sent him to Eton at the beginning of the 1850s. After two years, anyway, Dickens decided to move him because he was dissatisfied by Charley's poor progresses. Although Charley wanted to become an Army officer, Dickens – following a Gradgrindian factual attitude – suggested a career in business. But also this plan failed: after studying German in Leipzig, Charley's lack of inclination towards business convinced Dickens to desist. In a letter to Miss Coutts dated 14 January 1854 (a few months before *Hard Times* began to be serialized), Dickens blames his son for lassitude of character. Then, after a couple of failures in commercial training in Birmingham and London, Charley started working at Barings Bank at eighteen.

ter because of his failures as an acrobat, serves to counterbalance the novel's positive representation of the circus folk. Rather than a celebration of circus life, viewed as a symbol of creativity and artistic freedom, *Hard Times* offers a complicated and nuanced treatment of the role of artists.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the circus does not offer the sole escape from the gloomy Coketown reality (another one could be love, or mutual understanding). Dickens was evidently trying to mediate between artistic freedom and social cohesion (represented by the circus people) and Gradgrind's rationality.

At first, the dialogue between the circus people and Thomas Grandgrind (and Bounderby) appears an impossible attempt to communicate, as they seem to speak two different languages:

«Kidderminster», said Mr. Childers, raising his voice, «stow that! – Sir» to Mr. Gradgrind, «I was addressing myself to you. You may or you may not be aware (for perhaps you have not been much in the audience), that Jupe has missed his tip very often, lately».

«Has – what has he missed?» asked Mr. Gradgrind, glancing at the potent Bounderby for assistance.

«Missed his tip».

«Offered at the Garters four times last night, and never done 'em once», said Master Kidderminster. «Missed his tip at the banners, too, and was loose in his ponging».

«Didn't do what he ought to do. Was short in his leaps and bad in his tumbling», Mr. Childers interpreted.

«Oh!» said Mr. Gradgrind, «that is tip, is it?»

«In a general way that's missing his tip», Mr. E.W.B. Childers answered.

«Nine oils, Merrylegs, missing tips, garters, banners, and Ponging, eh!» ejaculated Bounderby, with his laugh of laughs. «Queer sort of company, too, for a man who has raised himself!». (p. 37)

The unintelligibility of their conversation – whose immediate effect on readers is comical – will have a darker (and finally tragic) implication for Gradgrind, who does not seem to understand the language spoken by his own children (Dickens repeatedly associates the circus folk with childhood and infancy).

By juxtaposing these opposite linguistic codes and idiolects in *Hard Times*, Dickens deliberately includes multiple voices. Each identifies a different ideologeme as an expression of the speech patterns and individual styles that stand for a set of social beliefs or, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, that represent the linguistic *Weltanschauung* of the various

9 As Alexander Welsh has noticed, «[for] all the overt propaganda on behalf of art, Dickens – so committed to earnestness and the work ethic – remains distrustful, or very cautious about artists» (Welsh 2000, p. 160).

characters/voices. While Gradgrind's language is «standardized» and «bookish» (Blanco 1985, pp. 22-23), the seducer James Harthouse resorts to a sophisticated and ornate style. Whereas Bounderby is usually explicit (to the point of being rude) and plain in his assertions – as is typical of his nature as a self-made man – Stephen Blackpool's way of speaking indicates his lack of education and his social status (he stands for factory workers):

«What», repeated Mr. Bounderby, folding his arms, «do you people, in a general way, complain of?»

Stephen looked at him with some little irresolution for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind.

«Sir, I were never good at showin o 't, though I ha had'n my share in feeling o 't. 'Deed we are in a muddle, sir. Look round town – so rich as 'tis – and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows, 'twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an' wheer we live, an' in what numbers, an' by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no nigher to ony dis'ant object – ceptin awlus, Death [...]».

«I'll tell you something towards it, at any rate,» returned Mr. Bounderby. «We will make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We'll indict the blackguards for felony, and get 'em shipped off to penal settlements».

Stephen gravely shook his head.

«Don't tell me we won't, man», said Mr. Bounderby, by this time blowing a hurricane, «because we will, I tell you!». (Flint 1995, pp. 152-153)

As for Slackbridge, he uses a «violent, biblical rhetoric» in another example of what Roger Fowler calls, in his Bakhtinian analysis of *Hard Times*, «the exceptional range of clearly differentiated voices» of the novel (Fowler 1989, pp. 82, 81). Moreover, in Slackbridge's language Dickens emphasizes the oratorical attitude and the theatricality – two aspects relevant to Dickens's increasing involvement in the dramatization of his own novels for public readings:

«Oh, my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh, my friends and fellow-countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism! Oh, my friends and fellow-sufferers, and fellow-workmen, and fellow-men! I tell you that the hour is come, when we must rally round one another as One united power, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battered upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labour of our hands, upon the strength of

our sinews, upon the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!». (Flint 1995, p. 141)

Along with diegetic incongruities, which represent the novel's limits and also its peculiarities, *Hard Times* is thus characterized by the presence of competing voices, each identifying a specific frame of mind. This makes it a dialogic text in which reality is not perceived from a single perspective and described monologically but reproduced and filtered through a heterogeneous, and aesthetically impure, assemblage of voices. These include those of the factual Gradgrind, the glacially Utilitarian Bitzer, the villainous and hypocritically plainspoken Bounderby, the linguistically impeded Sleary and the unfortunate Stephen Blackpool. The various styles and modes of speech of the different characters correspond to the multifaceted ideological messages that Dickens's novel provides. As a consequence, Bakhtin's definition of the polyphonic novel as a «phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice» may be applied to *Hard Times*: «[every] concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear» (Holquist 1981, pp. 261, 272).<sup>10</sup> The plurality of voices in *Hard Times* not only dramatizes its ideological hybridity but also conveys the aesthetic impurity of this novel, since it clearly foregrounds its mixture of different literary forms and styles. As a consequence, this heterogeneous textual and narrative assemblage (which mirrors the novel's ideological complexity) turns *Hard Times* into a novel that oversteps the traditional categories of low-brow and high-brow literature.

An exemplary element in the novels's complex multivocality is represented by Sleary, whose speech impairment mirrors his philosophically eccentric approach to everyday matters. Sleary has certainly been at the centre of much critical discussion, because he is the chief embodiment of fancy and of the principle of amusement per se. In characterizing him, Dickens makes his peculiar lisp an appropriate addition to his non-normative and carnivalesque nature: his speeches become the perfect instruments for the vocal channelling of his ideas.

«People mutht be amuthed, Thquire, thomehow», continued Sleary, rendered more pursy than ever, by so much talking; «they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning. Make the betht of uth; not the wurtht. I've got my living out of the horthe-riding all my life, I know; but I conthider that I lay down the philothophy of the thubject when I thay to you, Thquire, make the betht of uth: not the wurtht!»

<sup>10</sup> In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin defines the polyphonic novel as a text marked by a «plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices», whose characters must be «not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse» (Emerson 1984, pp. 6-7).

The Sleary philosophy was propounded as they went downstairs and the fixed eye of Philosophy – and its rolling eye, too – soon lost the three figures and the basket in the darkness of the street. (Flint 1995, p. 47)<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the novel, Sleary's «philothophy» will be successful, in contrast to the false clear-headedness of Grandgrind, who will realise the necessity of existential, experiential and ideological impurity, namely of mixing and mingling with people (and opinions) that are different from his. After having confessed the failure of her marriage and her sentimental interest in Harthouse, Louisa addresses her father in tones that are accusing and pleading at once: «All I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!» (p. 219). Louisa here begs her father to intervene in the resolution of the plot and to question his own values as an individual. In this sense, *Hard Times* resembles a 'conversion narrative', in particular as regards Gradgrind, who undergoes a gradual evolution and a change of heart in the course of the narration. In the final chapter of the novel Gradgrind is emblematically presented as a different individual:

Here was Mr. Gradgrind on the same day, and in the same hour, sitting thoughtful in his own room. How much of futurity did he see? Did he see himself, a white-haired decrepit man, bending his hitherto inflexible theories to appointed circumstances; making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity; and no longer trying to grind that Heavenly trio in his dusty little mills? (p. 296)

Unlike him, Signor Jupe and Sleary – traditionally considered the emblems of artistic creativity – do not change as individuals. In one of the most significant scenes of the novel, the factual Mr. Gradgrind is sitting in the middle of a circus ring, confronting his son Tom disguised as a clown. Metaphorically speaking, the necessity of impurity, in the sense of mixing opposite ideologemes such as fancy (the circus) and fact (Utilitarianism), offers a way out for the Gradgrind family:

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Caserio interprets Sleary's lisp through a poststructuralist lens, underlining that what this character says is «complemented by his speech impediment. If language is environed by phenomena hard to name, if it is always hard times for nomination and definition, then language itself is Sleary's impediment. Since language only lisps the truths that matter, we must, as Sleary would say, take on 'trutht' the truths that evade our namings [...]. Fancy or imagination in the novel plays the role of trustworthy conductor or guide to the realms of articulation that articulateness obstructs» (Caserio 1986, p. 6).

Mr. Gradgrind sat down forlorn, on the Clown's performing chair in the middle of the ring. On one of the back benches, remote in the subdued light and the strangeness of the place, sat the villainous whelp, sulky to the last, whom he had the misery to call his son. (p. 283)

Fancy and inventiveness are the only instruments that can allow Gradgrind (and, metaliterarily speaking, Dickens the writer) to avoid becoming slave to facts, and to the laws of profit and gaining. Only through the necessary mediation of fancy, can Louisa's life (and Dickens's writing) be «saved by some other means». When Sleary gives his final lesson to Mr. Gradgrind just before the novel's end, readers have the impression that the circus manager is not just talking to Tom and Louisa's father, but to the writer of *Hard Times* as well:

«Thquire, thake handth, firht and latht! Don't be croth with uth poor vagabondth. People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You *mutht* have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the betht of uth; not the wurht!» (p. 292)

Differently from Bitzer, a firm disciple of the Utilitarian doctrine «for whom all human relations are market transactions», Gradgrind embodies Dickens's desire to become a «good Utilitarian agent», being able – as Martha Nussbaum writes – «to address productively the needs of those around him» (Nussbaum 1995, pp. 66-67). Through the story recounted in *Hard Times*, the narrator teaches Gradgrind, Dickens's factual alter ego, the value and importance of impurity.

The symbolic function fulfilled by Sleary and the Sleary circus, which incarnate Dickens's exaltation of fancy as a release from the constraints of facts, is confirmed by the author's omission of all financial facts in the circus narrative. Even though he was well-informed as a professional writer and entertainer about financial matters, Dickens avoids mentioning the way circus people earn money and survive the hard times recounted in the novel. Dickens purposely ignores, in a way, all those material aspects of circus life that he knew well (as testified by his interest in the Astley circus and in the famous clown Joseph Grimaldi). For this reason Paul Schlicke repeatedly underlines Dickens's tendency towards «idealization» in his treatment of the circus. The striking element about circus life in *Hard Times* «is not that Dickens included it, but that he virtually ignored its relevance to the increasingly dominant tendencies of popular entertainment». Dickens must have known that from the 1850s onwards the old tradition of popular entertainment, with which he was so familiar, was undergoing a profound change, and that the new circus economy reflected the way leisure was becoming a brand product regu-

lated by market laws. Yet «instead of including demonstrable evidence of the circus as an enterprise consonant with modern society, [Dickens] chose to focus on the desire for shared enjoyments of small groups of spectators and the desire to please which motivated the performers» (Schlicke 1985, p. 152).

The circus and the factory in *Hard Times* are therefore two facets of the same narrative project focused on a reflection about narrative representation and literary aesthetics. The fact that Dickens writes about factories without mentioning what the Coketown «hands» manufacture, and, at the same time, that he focuses on circus people from an extremely allusive perspective, reinforces the impression that *Hard Times* was not intended as a traditionally realistic text. The peculiar formal and ideological nature of this novel suggests that Dickens's view of realism and of realistic narration needs to be approached as an exceedingly nuanced aesthetic issue. In a letter to John Forster, Dickens comes to the point of admitting his partial inability to cope with the necessity of «stating the truth», adding that «[it] does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth. The exact truth must be there; but the merit or art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth. As to which thing in literature, it always seems to me that there is a world to be done» (Forster 1966, p. 279).

Through its polyphonic structure and its formal mixture of opposites, *Hard Times* interrogates the aesthetic principles of realism from within. The novel's hybridity and impurity stand as a material example of Dickens's experimental attitude in writing a novel that, though only superficially realistic, meditates on the ways in which reality can be experienced, and fictionally reproduced. It is indicative in this respect that, before the conclusion, Dickens decides to sacrifice – as it were, to kill – Stephen Blackpool, one of the few representatives – along with Slackbridge – of the factory people he met in person during his brief visit in Preston. Even the name of the character, as usually happens in Dickens's *oeuvre*, has an ironic undertone. Unconvincing, flat, stereotyped, and doomed to an untimely death, Stephen is basically a waste and a blotch of ink, a 'black pool'.

As proof of the impossibility of offering a final solution to such a tale (and such a novel), Dickens leaves the epilogue of *Hard Times* in the hands of his readers. By handing responsibility to his audience on the moral meaning of his story Dickens not only replicates the conventions of Victorian sermons but, in some respects, may be also seen as anticipating the twentieth-century reader-response theories developed by Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, according to which readers are not passive consumers of art but active agents in the construction of meaning:

Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter



bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.  
(Flint 1995, p. 298)

The destiny of Louisa, Sissy, Gradgrind and of the other characters of *Hard Times* is finally left in the hands of the reading public. In fact, the ambiguous conclusion of Dickens's novel suggests something more about his ambivalent attitude towards the economic theories of the Victorian age. If, as Regenia Gagnier points out, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a transition from the consideration of people as producers (advocated, among others, by Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx) to that of people as consumers (Gagnier 2000, pp. 2-4), Dickens's choice to leave the last decision to his reading public is appropriate. It indicates even that he was ahead of his times in sensing that literature, rather than being simply produced, was destined to be consumed just like any manufactured good of the Coketown mills. Dickens's aesthetically impure narration of the hard times of factory workers and family relations thus becomes a parable of the uneven relationship between fact and consumer taste in his own art. And, as readers know, Dickens's own art was destined for reproduction in innumerable formats (e-books, movies, audiobooks, digital sources etc.) and for endless consumption by future generations.

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## Morbid Taste, Morbid Anatomy and Victorian Sensation Fiction

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas

(Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès/Centre Alexandre Koyré [UMR 8560 - CNRS - EHESS - MNHN], France)

**Abstract** This article examines the role that references to morbid anatomy played in some popular Victorian novels, such as those of Wilkie Collins. Because the allusions to morbid anatomy were closely related to the new type of realism that Victorian popular literature proposed, they participated in the definition of popular literature as vulgar, offensive and dangerous for impressionable young women. As this paper shows, indeed, images of morbid anatomy do not simply highlight and capitalize on the Victorians' morbid fascination with death. Above all, by embodying and recording cultural responses to medical science, they offer insights into definitions of popular literature and popular taste.

**Summary** 1 Exhibiting the Female Body: from the Aesthetic to the Pornographic. – 2 The «Unknown Public» and the Issue of Literary Taste. – 3 «So disgusting and immoral» (Anon. 1857, p. 175): From Dr. Kahn's Anatomical Museum to Docteur Le Doux's Sanatorium.

**Keywords** Anatomy. Body. Medicine. Sensation fiction.

### 1 Exhibiting the Female Body: from the Aesthetic to the Pornographic

One day, at a quiet early hour, I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery, wherein one particular picture of pretentious size, set up in the best of light, having a cordon of protection stretched before it, and a cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshipping connoisseurs, who, having gazed themselves off their feet, might be fain to complete the business sitting: this picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have

consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscles, that affluence of flesh. [...] she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine. (Lilly 1985, p. 275)

When Charlotte Brontë's heroine, Lucy Snowe, enters the picture gallery in *Villette* (1853) and gazes at the *Cleopatra*, her description of the female character's corporeality – her impressive weight, muscles, spine or flesh – strikingly reveals Lucy's lack of artistic taste. As opposed to the worshipping art connoisseurs, Lucy's almost anatomical gaze reads flesh where art should be read and does not seem to master the codes of consumption here. Her lack of «cultural competence» prevents her from going «beyond the sensible properties [and] identify the specifically stylistic properties of the work» (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 1-7; in Storey 1998, p. 432). Ironically enough, her tasteless depiction of the work of art creates a metadiscourse: Lucy's description counteracts to some extent the «aesthetics of realism» which, according to Peter Brooks, «does not bring the more graphic and detailed report of the naked body» (Brooks 1993, pp. 18-19). For Brooks, indeed, realistic fiction focuses rather on the accessories that «adorn and mask the body» (p. 19) so as to avoid being read as pornographic. Thus, poles apart from this masking of the corporeal body, Lucy's reading of the fleshliness of the female character lays bare the «weight of social repressions [which] affect[ed] representation of the body» in England at the time and which was particularly registered in Victorian fiction. In other words, even if Brontë's heroine's criticism contains moralistic comments (since Lucy Snowe criticizes the laziness of the female character and reads her body solely in terms of the domestic tasks she might perform), her description illuminates the gap between the written body, especially female, always clothed in Victorian novels, and some visual representations of the (female) body that could be seen in public venues throughout the century.

As a matter of fact, characters are often displayed and observed in *Villette*, and the novel is punctuated by a series of spectacles, from exhibited pictures to dramatic performances. For Heather Glen, the world of *Villette* is one «of show and display» which illuminates a «culture of enjoyable spectacle» marked by the 1851 Great Exhibition (Glen 2006, p. 213). Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* is a significant literary example which brings to light the connections and/or tensions between representations of the female body in Victorian literature and the Victorian visual culture. At mid-century in Victorian England, everything seemed to be on display, from manufactured goods to women's bodies. Throughout Brontë's novel, Lucy sees every «object worth seeing», visits «every museum», «every hall» and «galleries, salles, and cabinets» (Lilly 1985, p. 273), actively participating in her visual culture. However, Paul Emmanuel's reaction when

he finds Lucy unchaperoned in front of the painting evinces mid-century constructions of the female viewer/reader and uncovers contemporary morals or fears of immorality. In the 1850s, books such as William Acton's *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects* (1857) or *The Night Side of London* (1857), by James Ewing Ritchie, denounced the prostitute as the epitome of vice and condemned the ostentatious/deviant female body as a source of depravity. 1857 was also the year of the passing of *The Obscene Publication Act*, which enabled the prosecution of authors and publishers selling pornographic material. The act typified the increasing role of the state in the control of sexual behaviour. As Alison Smith explains, the 1850s saw a growing concern for public morality (Smith 1996, p. 62): representations of the body, especially female, were regarded with suspicion and artistic displays of nudity were likely to be considered as obscene. The influence of the evangelical social activists of the 1850s on definitions of art was not inconsequential. Artistic forms, shows or displays of sorts likely to corrupt or deprave the most emotionally susceptible – mainly women and children – were placed under high scrutiny. Debates around what was art and what was pornography emerged. This was particularly the case of «non-art shows» which, in Smith's terms, «played provocatively with the language of high art through tactics of innuendo and arousal» (p. 50). Among them, anatomical waxworks and preparations frequently occupied centrestage: many of them overtly focused on sexuality, showing the ravages of syphilis or the various stages of pregnancy and using a medical discourse and highly ornamented anatomical models (which often wore necklaces, for instance) both to instruct medical professionals and to entertain the lay public.

The opening of public anatomical museums in the nineteenth century, at a time when medical collections became pivotal tools in medical education,<sup>1</sup> attracted many visitors. In London, Antonio Sarti's (1839-50), Reimers's (1852-53) and Dr. Kahn's (1851-72) were amongst the most famous collections to be visited by men and women alike,<sup>2</sup> whilst some were exclusively reserved for women, such as Madame Caplin's (Bates 2008, p. 11). The collections comprised artificial anatomical models as well as preparations and curiosities of sorts. The recumbent anatomical Venuses, especially the late-eighteenth-century Florentine models, with their flowing hair, were certainly not free of sexual titillation, and wax exhibitions were often promoted in almanacs that included pornographic images, as Pamela Pilbeam argues (Pilbeam 2003, p. 16). As Francesco de Ceglia

1 As A.W. Bates explains, anatomy teachers were expected to own a museum worth more than £500 in the 1820s to be recognized by the College of Surgeons (Bates 2008, p. 5). Bates cites Desmond (1989, pp. 162-163).

2 Kahn's Museum, first opened to men only, opened to women two months later (Bates 2008, p. 10).

contends, the various responses to anatomical collections and representations of corpses throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not unrelated to the change in aesthetics. The morbid aesthetics of the late eighteenth century aligned the corpse, «especially if decomposed and disarticulated», with «the dominance of the wild, [...] thus open[ing] the floodgates of an uncontrolled sexuality». In the nineteenth century, moreover, death would flirt with pornography, «so ‘other’ as to be unmentionable and unrepresentable» (Ceglia 2006, p. 430).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the collections also displayed the ravages of syphilis and gonorrhoea in rooms sometimes set apart and exclusively restricted to members of the medical profession (Anon. 1851a, p. 474). This was the case of Dr. Kahn’s Anatomical Museum, which opened in London in 1851. Owned by Joseph Kahn, a German «medical doctor» as he called himself, the museum gave rise to heated debate in the medical journal *The Lancet* in the years that followed the opening of the museum. Kahn had been accused of allowing women to all the rooms in the museum, in particular the room containing the models representing the damages of syphilis and gonorrhoea. In June 1854, Kahn replied to the editor of *The Lancet* that «not only is ‘the room for medical men’ in the museum closed on the days that ladies are admitted, but all the models in the other room which could offend the most prudish taste are removed» (Anon. 1854a, p. 654). The following week, a response to Kahn’s answer appeared, the correspondent – «J. Leach, M.D.» – a former lecturer at the museum, arguing that females had indeed been «permitted to inspect the syphilitic models, without distinction of age» (Anon. 1854b, p. 684). In 1857 the passing of the *Obscene Publications Act* offered a legal means of closing Dr. Kahn’s Museum down as the Act condemned «conduct inconsistent with public morals» (Bates 2006, p. 621).

It is in this context that the sensation novel, a popular literary genre of the 1860s, appeared, shocking, like Kahn’s museum, the «most prudish taste». As the name of the genre suggested, this type of popular fiction placed the pleasure of the senses at the heart of the reading experience. As a result, the sensation novel challenged contemporary definitions of art and was frequently condemned for breeding forms of impure taste in the readers. At a time when most art critics, such as John Ruskin, believed in the relationship between art and morality, sensation novelists flouted moral concerns through their improper heroines and subverted the Hegelian belief that art should generate moral betterment. As many critics have already highlighted, the female body played a central part in most sensational plots. Masquerading, displayed on canvasses, diseased or disfigured or even metaphorically unveiled through the investigation, the spectacularised female body of sensation fiction conflicted with Victorian realism.

3 Francesco de Ceglia cites Goror (1965).



As Pamela Gilbert argues, «Realism comes to be understood as a genre which constructs itself on the basis of difference from the popular, and thus, as a genre which relies on framing the body in more careful, more nuanced and less spec(tac)ular ways» (Gilbert 1997, p. 93). Poles apart from mainstream realistic fiction, sensation fiction not only exhibited the female body, but played as well with its boundaries by transgressing the space of the (female) reader, acting on its nerves just as it often violated the bodies of its characters. As this article will show, sensation novelists played with representations of the body in ways that were reminiscent of contemporary medical shows and exhibitions. Defined as «curiosities of literature» (Anon. 1868c, p. 235), sensation novels frequently placed in the margins of the texts medical curiosities which functioned as tell-tale devices, laying bare the mechanisms of the detective narrative and recurrently suggesting images of the body opened, dissected and exhibited. By examining Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (1866), a sensation novel which was particularly compared to a freak show, I will argue that motifs related to the world of anatomy, which often pass unnoticed, might however explain why the sensation novel was condemned as aesthetically impure.

## 2 The «Unknown Public» and the Issue of Literary Taste

Throughout their literary careers, both Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Victorian writers involved in the sensation genre, were concerned with the new reading masses and the need to educate the taste of the reading public. Wilkie Collins's essay, «The Unknown Public», written in 1858 for *Household Words* and reprinted in 1863 in *My Miscellanies*, which deals with the penny-novel journals, shows how mass consumption raised a concern for taste among the Victorian intellectual élites. The «mysterious publications» which Collins notices are sold in «fruit-shops, in oyster-shops, in lollypop-shops» among other types of goods, and they are indiscriminately consumed for lack of guidance (Collins 1858, p. 217). Tellingly, Collins ranges the publications on the tree of the «literary family» (p. 217), penny-novel journals being «a branch of literature» (p. 218) or a «new species of literary production» (p. 217). The «classified» «specimens» (p. 218) are compared to «lad[s]» or «infant[s]» (p. 217) and identifiable through their «insist[ance] on being looked at by everybody» (p. 217). Low mass culture is not only associated with display but also placed alongside an evolutionary scale, readers evolving through time as Collins concludes at the end of his essay:

Meanwhile, it is perhaps hardly too much to say that the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad. It is probably

a question of time only. The largest audience for periodical literature, in this age of periodicals, must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate. (p. 222)

Collins's analysis of a public who «reads for its amusement more than for its information» (p. 218) interweaves therefore literary aesthetic categories with social categories. The kind of subject-matters tackled by such publications, moreover, typifies the readers' lack of cultural competence: the stories are hackneyed and repetitive, many of them simply duplicated from one publication to the next. But Collins is also particularly taken aback by the readers' correspondence to the editor, many of their letters dealing with physical ailments from how to dye hair, artificially restore complexion and get rid of corns to cures from grey hair, warts or worms. Thus, to the vulgar showiness of the publications is added an indecent exhibition of the readers' own bodies.

That ways of presenting, writing, looking at or displaying the body could be linked to aesthetic considerations is also obvious in Dickens's record of a journey to the Paris morgue. In one of the articles of *The Uncommercial Traveller* published in 1863, Dickens stressed the public's lack of training when looking at the «objects» on display. The scene describes a custodian who advises the crowd to entertain themselves «with the other curiosities» (Dickens 1863, p. 277) whilst a freshly brought corpse is being prepared for exhibition. The cadavers are constructed as objects to be looked at and aligned with museum exhibits. Furthermore, Dickens compares the visitors' mere thirst for sensations with «looking at waxwork without a catalogue»:

There was a wolfish stare at the object, in which homicidal white-lead worker shone conspicuous. And there was a much more general, purposeless, vacant staring at it – like looking at waxwork, without a catalogue, and not knowing what to make of it. (p. 278)

Dickens's association of the corpses with artificial wax models is telling. Although waxworks could encapsulate objects as different as characters ranging from models of royals, natural wonders, celebrated criminals, and even stock characters typically found in waxwork exhibitions and fairs, the reference to waxwork here aims rather at the type of waxworks found in the teaching cabinets in medical schools and medical museums. The description of the public's untrained gaze at the naked body on display suggests that their gazing at the corpse is pure entertainment and therefore potentially vulgar and typical of low mass culture, exactly like Collins's description of the public's inability to discriminate among types of publications. Originally published in *All the Year Round* on May 16, 1863, the article is reminiscent of Dickens's description of Miss Havisham in *Great*

*Expectations* (1861), which also used the pivotal motif of the waxwork to define the villainess whom Pip compares to «some ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state» (Cardwell 1994, p. 57) in a scene which enhances Pip's scopic desire. In Dickens's novel the motif of the waxwork betokens Pip's refusal to acknowledge the reality of Miss Havisham's corpse-like appearance, her body shrunk to skin and bone («It was not in the first moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed», p. 57). Wax displaces and replaces the gruesome body, therefore, whilst Miss Havisham's wax-like and virginal corpse highlights the female character's (vain) attempt at arresting physical decomposition and counteracting time and death. The wax model thus typifies the narrative's interplay with anxieties related to time and bodily decay, particularly that of the female body, more especially so when Miss Havisham wishes to be laid upon the table when dead, with people coming and looking at her – «the complete realisation of the ghastly waxwork at the fair» (p. 83).

These two examples show how displays and readings of the body in the Victorian era crisscrossed with aesthetic considerations. The compulsive and barely literate readers who read for amusement rather than instruction, just like the lack of training of viewers in Dickens's description of the Morgue, explain why the sensation novel raised so many sharp criticisms in the 1860s. The narratives displayed female bodies which were passively consumed by their readership whilst the detective narratives invited readers to uncover the secrets of the female characters as in a morbid striptease. Thus, sensation novels appealed to readers in the same way as freak shows or medical collections: they promised readers to show them what lay beneath the skirts or skin of some of their heroines and villainesses, strongly relying on medical diagnosis to access the truth. The highly popular novels were inspired, as reviews noted, by «highly-spiced police reports instead of politics» (Stephen 1869, p. 722). Thus, critics denounced «the false taste which made the whole interest of a book turn upon mere horrors of blood and crime and the gallows» (p. 723) or the «perverted and vitiated taste» of periodical or magazine readers (Anon. 1863, p. 262), just like the taste of their writers, as the following reviewer highlights after the publication of Collins's *Basil* in 1853: «We must, therefore, doubt the taste as well as the judgment of the writer» (Anon. 1853, p. 372). The idea that Collins deliberately adapted his novels to the taste of his public – or even «pandered» to the public's distasteful desires, as a reviewer noted – lies at the root of many a criticism: «There can be no doubt that Mr. Collins has studied the tastes of his public, and in certain instances has pleased them – we will not say pandered to them – with great success» (Anon. 1872a, p. 282).

Unsurprisingly, the metaphors that were used in many of the reviews denouncing the sensation novelists' appeal to the public's baser instincts

compared literary creativity with the display of diseased specimens, recalling once again the Victorian visual culture and the shows promising to unveil the mysteries of the body. In the following excerpt, the sensation novelist reveals the diseases of society:

We are in a period of diseased invention, and the coming phase of it may be palsy. Mr. Collins belongs to the class of professing satirists who are eager to lay bare the «blotches and blains» which fester beneath the skin and taint the blood of humanity. ([H.F. Chorley] 1866, p. 733)

The sensation novelist was regularly compared with some kind of anatomist «lay[ing] bare» the «bones» of society, while the reviewer suggests here that the novelist should instead cover such less attractive aspects of life:

[...] one is rather curious about the quality of mind that can produce such wonderfully intricate skeletons of stories without the power of more completely hiding the dry bones with the better-known and more attractive covering that we see in the life about us. (Anon. 1872b, pp. 158-159)

The remark highlights how mainstream Victorian realist fiction veiled more than it exposed bodies whilst sensation novels, on the contrary, invited readers to metaphorically lift up the clothes or even strip the skin of the characters. The medical vocabulary which peppers the reviews filters as well in the use of the term «morbidity». The «morbid improbability» of novels like *Armada* (Anon. 1868b, pp. 881-882) or the «morbid analysis of mere sensation» (Anon. 1860, p. 210) turn narratives into so many bodies subjected to a medical gaze. In «The Morals of Literature», published in 1864, Frances Power Cobbe reflects upon the ethics of modes of writing and the writer's duty when «expos[ing] to the public» his characters (Cobbe 1864, p. 124). As she deals with biographies and the «violations of the sanctities of the inner life» (p. 124), corporeal metaphors proliferate: images of opening and violation of the «heart» or of «the soul's secrets», «injur[ies] done by such a literature [...] like a blow on a woman's face» (p. 125) define sensational literary works. Writers are compared to medical professionals, able with their «pen [to] tear open all the wounds, expose all the diseases of humanity» (p. 130). What Cobbe's metaphors denounce, above all, is the realism of this type of literature: «Men first fall into the delusion that all that is real is a subject of art, and that nothing is real except the ugly and the mean» (p. 131). Cobbe's remark betrays her period's views on the links between morality and aesthetics, suggesting an almost Hegelian position here in the way in which beauty and ugliness intermingle with moral concerns. Sensational realism is therefore aligned with exposure, exhibition and opening, terms which are reminiscent of the world of anatomy and surgical skill. The «ugly and the mean» are,

indeed, what the literary critics decry, pointing out characters with «so much deformity», such as Lady Audley, «the lovely woman with the fishy extremities» (Dallas 1862, p. 8). Moral difformity is visible, material, and as tangible as a natural curiosity or a medical exhibit, as when Wilkie Collins's Lydia Gwilt is compared to «a waxwork figure displayed from time to time in every conceivable sort of garish light» (Anon. 1866, pp. 726-727), recalling the anatomical Venuses whose body parts could be lifted so as to reveal inner organs. The medical realism of sensation novels, it appears, turned sensational characters into medical specimens exhibited in anatomical collections, their characterization betraying the writer's lack of good taste:

in his most horrible moments [...] [Wilkie Collins] is never otherwise than entertaining, except when he commits a breach of good-taste. [...] Moral deformity is as much a matter of growth, organisation, and permanence as is physical deformity (Anon. 1880, pp. 627-628).

The comparison of sensation fiction with the field of medicine, surgery or anatomy was developed further by many reviews which defined sensation novels as «surgical» or «medical novel[s]» (Anon. 1872a, pp. 282-283), as in the case of *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), for instance, or *Heart and Science* (1883). As reviewers noted, the latter contained «a good deal of science», especially in the «physiological part» of the narrative, «the manuscript having been submitted to an eminent London surgeon» (Cook 1883, p. 538), and aligned the writers with physicians:

Most of the writers who find fault with the institutions of their country – with its legal, medical and theological doctrines and practices – have remedies to propose for all the ills they discover; but Wilkie Collins contents himself generally with pointing out the evils that exist, leaving to others the work of devising the cure. In this respect he presents a marked contrast to Charles Reade, who prescribes minutely for everything from tight lacing to the treatment of the insane, teaches the doctors how to deal with sprains, and defines the changes that should be made in the statutes. (Stewart 1878 in Page 1974, pp. 226-227)

It is significant that, although many of the criticisms denounced the mechanical constructions of the plot and the stereotyped characters, the issue of taste was more often than not related to the medical realism of the narratives and to the display of characters compared to medical curiosities by reviewers. In fact, the links between the medical field and the (female) body which sensation novels constantly foregrounded constructed a typically «modern» reading experience which clashed with the issue of bourgeois taste: sensation novels lay bare the «epistemophilic» urge to know the body of the woman, in Peter Brooks's words, constructing the female body as the archetypal object of desire (Brooks 1993, p. 65).

For Lawrence Rothfield, the use of clinical discourse by novelists

emerged with the publication of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857. As he argues, Flaubert's novel constructed «the relation of self to body as a medical one» (Rothfield 1992, p. xiii). This clinical mode of representation (the appearance of illness as an «integrated aspect of narrative») defines realistic description as «an almost microscopic precision about the material conditions of the body» (pp. 5, 7). With their detective plots and investigations, sensation novelists thus created narratives that played upon the tension between the visible and the invisible, reading the symptoms on the surface of the body and tracing them «back to the interiority of the body» (p. 95), as when the secrets of Lady Audley are related to hereditary insanity, for instance. In other words, the plots «dragg[ed] the invisible into the real of the visible» (p. 95), recalling the anatomists' search for the seats of diseases/truth. The influence of French fiction on Victorian sensation fiction was obvious in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and many references to characters reading French novels, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, or having a French education, such as Franklin Blake in Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), gave a taste of licentiousness, immorality or flightiness to the sensational characters.<sup>4</sup> But the characters were also associated with French medicine, as in Collins's *Armada*, where an abortionist and later quack psychiatrist has bought the name and diploma from a French doctor. Dr. Le Doux's enterprise may to some extent be reminiscent of that of the «German doctor», Dr. Kahn, in London. The latter was eventually accused of selling quack remedies for venereal diseases, Kahn collaborating with the company Perry and Co., known for offering cures for such diseases (Bates 2006, p. 620), and his models illustrating the progress of sexually-transmitted diseases had been imported from France.<sup>5</sup> The debate around Kahn's quackery was still

4 Mary Elizabeth Braddon was well read and travelled extensively throughout her life, fuelling her fiction with manifold influences. She could read and write in French, had a subscription to the French circulating library Rolandi in London, read French journals, such as the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and loved French literature from Balzac and Zola to Flaubert, Maupassant or Dumas. Balzac particularly marked several of her novels, such as *Birds of Prey* (1867) and its sequel, *Charlotte's Inheritance* (1868), in which a poisoner reads Balzac. Her 1891 novel *Gerard* was also based upon Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*. Her novels of the 1880s were more significantly branded by the influence of French naturalism. The recurrent theme of alcohol and the figures of drunkards, as in *The Cloven Foot* (1879) or *The Golden Calf* (1883), typify Braddon's reliance on naturalistic themes and motifs. Shifting from Balzac and Flaubert (as exemplified by *The Doctor's Wife*, 1864, a reworking of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), to Zolaesque characters, Braddon followed the literary trends of the era, adapting French characters to English society and often featuring degenerate English gentlemen.

5 «The progress of gonorrhoea and syphilis is beautifully exhibited in a series of excellent models, taken from cases in the Hôpital des Vénériens and Val de Grace» (Anon. 1851b, p. 496). Note here the adverb «beautifully» in an article which praises Kahn's collection. This kind of aesthetic comment vanished as early as in 1854. The models were then deemed «objectionable» (Anon. 1854c, p. 89) or «disgusting», as mentioned above (Anon. 1857, p. 175).



intense in the 1860s and therefore likely to inspire sensational narratives (see Anon. 1868a). As we shall now see, *Armada*, set in 1851, capitalizes on many of the motifs typically associated with «morbid taste» in the years that preceded the passing of the 1857 *Obscene Publication Act* and is one of the sensation novels which most hints at medical collections and post-mortem examinations.

### 3 «So disgusting and immoral» : From Dr. Kahn's Anatomical Museum to Docteur Le Doux's Sanatorium

When Wilkie Collins's *Armada* appeared in 1866, one of the reviews compared the author to the showman Richardson whose famous travelling show exhibited freaks and exotic creatures at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The review focuses on taste and compares the sensation novel to food and disease, both the eating metaphor and the trope of the epidemic/endemic disease suggesting the contamination and «violation of the domestic body» (Gilbert 1997, p. 4), as Pamela Gilbert contends.

There is no accounting for tastes, blubber for the Esquimaux, half-hatched eggs for the Chinese, and Sensational novels for the English. Everything must now be sensational. Professor Kingsley sensationalized History, and Mr. Wilkie Collins daily life. One set of writers wear the sensational buskin, another the sensational sock. Just as in the Middle Ages people were afflicted by the Dancing Mania and Lycanthropy, sometimes barking like dogs, and sometimes mewing like cats, so now we have a Sensational Mania. Just, too, as those diseases always occurred in seasons of dearth and poverty, and attacked only the poor, so does the Sensational Mania in Literature burst out only in times of mental poverty, and afflict only the most poverty-stricken minds. From an epidemic, however, it has lately changed into an endemic. Its virus is spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume. (Anon. 1866b, p. 269)

The review articulates the connection between social and mental poverty, moral corruption resulting from the reader's lack of taste and collapsing thereby social differences between readers. However, if the first part of the review has often been analysed, the second part is significant in the way in which it compares the sensation novel to Richardson's menagerie and its characters to exhibited creatures:

When Richardson, the showman, went about with his menagerie he had a big black baboon, whose habits were so filthy, and whose behaviour



was so disgusting, that respectable people constantly remonstrated with him for exhibiting such an animal. Richardson's answer invariably was, «Bless you, if it wasn't for that big black baboon I should be ruined; it attracts all the young girls in the country». Now bigamy has been Miss Braddon's big black baboon, with which she has attracted all the young girls in the country. And now Mr. Wilkie Collins has set a big black baboon on his own account. His big black baboon is Miss Gwilt, a bigamist, thief, goal-bird, forgeress, murderess, and suicide. This beats all Miss Braddon's big black baboons put together. [...] But besides the big black baboon there are a number of small baboons and monkeys, for by no stretch of language can they be called human creatures. The most prominent are a hag, who paints and enamels women's faces, and a doctor, whose services, when we are first introduced to him, are apparently principally required by painted women. Lying, cheating, intriguing, and dreaming strange dreams are the characteristics of these animals. (pp. 269-270)

The interest here is that the reviewer's comparison of the characters with exotic animals brings to light key motifs of the narrative. Lydia Gwilt, as the novel's big black baboon, is accompanied by other «animals», Mrs. Oldershaw, the beautician shaped after Rachel Levison, and Dr. Downward (alias Le Doux), an abortionist and later quack psychiatrist. Prostitution and abortion – the novel's explicit references to the world of sexuality – are pointed out. The ape metaphors, together with the image of the show, construct the sensation novel as a freak show displaying exotic creatures. To images of poverty, corruption and immorality are therefore added hints at foreignness and, perhaps, degeneration. But more significantly still, the review highlights the way in which Collins anchors the detective plot within a culture of exhibition which becomes central to the investigation. *Armada* is set in 1851, at the time of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, and the characters even visit the exhibition. As a whole, like in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, bodies are frequently on display, many of them performing, from Lydia Gwilt, a born actress, displayed as a child by a traveling quack doctor, «as a living example of the excellence of his washes and hair-oils» (Sutherland 1995, p. 520) to characters specialised in cosmetics, such as Mrs. Oldershaw, or others hiding their identity or diseases under layers of make-up. The number of characters subjected to the medical gaze, moreover, constructs the novel as a vitrine of exhibited patients, not much unlike the reviewer's baboons. At the opening of the novel, Allan Armadale is dying of syphilis and his body holds secrets which only the medical professional is able to «penetrate» (p. 311), his gaze seeing through the flesh:

He lay helpless on a mattress supported by a stretcher; his hair long and disordered under a black skull-cap; his eyes wide open, rolling to

and fro ceaselessly anxious; the rest of his face as void of all expression of the character within him, and the thought within him, as if he had been dead. The leaden blank of his face met every question as to his age, his rank, his temper, and his looks which that face might once have answered, in impenetrable silence. Nothing spoke for him now but the shock that had struck him with the death-in-life of Paralysis. The doctor's eye questioned his lower limbs, and Death-in-life answered, *I am here*. The doctor's eye, rising attentively by way of his hands and arms, questioned upward and upward to the muscles around his mouth, and Death-in-Life answered, *I am coming*. (p. 13)

The focus on what lies inside the body and which holds the truth about the body turns the latter into a territory awaiting investigation and anticipates the whole play upon poison on which the narrative hinges. Indeed, the poison plots soon conjure up scenes of post-mortem examinations and hint at anatomical dissection, the latter promising access to the truth beneath layers of make-up. References to the body dissected and exhibited appear as significant landmarks in the narrative as when Dr. Hawbury offers to show Allan Armadale his «curious cases» at home – pickled specimens – and Armadale hears about the ship on which his father was murdered, or when Dr. Le Doux, the abortionist turned into a quack psychiatrist, welcomes Lydia Gwilt to plot the murder of Allan Armadale and takes her to his office where «shapeless dead creatures of a dull white colour float[ing] in yellow liquid» (p. 588), as emblems of medical authority, are on display on shelves.

As argued above, in Victorian Britain, the politics of viewing often went hand-in-hand with the issue of taste. This was particularly the case when viewers were invited to gaze at the displayed corpses in the Morgue in Paris, as Charles Dickens underlined, or at preserved body parts dried or suspended in alcohol in medical museums as the former lecturer at Kahn's museum suggested. The references to such collections in sensation novels is in keeping with the type of realism that this popular genre offered – much more graphic than mainstream realism and inviting readers to unveil the secrets of the (female) character's bodies. The embedded motifs referring to the material culture of medicine functioned thus as so many tell-tale motifs illuminating the impropriety of novels regarded as culturally unrefined and unfit for young and impressionable women.

It is therefore not surprising that the last part of Collins's novel, which takes place in Le Doux's medical establishment for nervous patients, should hinge upon allusions to autopsies. While Gwilt had so far used domestic poisons, inspired by contemporary criminal cases of female poisoners (although medical witnesses' opinions differed as to the poison she had used to kill her first husband), the last part of the narrative yokes together the use of poisons and the medical field. Le Doux advises Gwilt to use his miraculous poison to get rid of Allan Armadale, mentioning the

legal autopsies generally practised on corpses in cases of suspected poisoning, as the one practised on Gwilt's first husband (p. 527).<sup>6</sup>

Our Stout Friend by himself, is a most harmless and useful medicine. He is freely dispensed every day to tens of thousands of patients all over the civilized world. He has made no romantic appearances in courts of law; he has excited no breathless interest in novels; he has played no terrifying part on the stage. There he is, an innocent, inoffensive creature, who troubles nobody with the responsibility of locking him up! *But* bring him into contact with something else – introduce him to the acquaintance of a certain common mineral Substance, of a universally accessible kind, broken into fragments; provide yourself with (say) six doses of our Stout Friend, and pour those doses consecutively on the fragments I have mentioned, at intervals of not less than five minutes. Quantities of little bubbles will rise at every pouring; collect the gas in those bubbles, and convey it into a closed chamber – and let Samson himself be in that closed chamber, our Stout Friend will kill him in half-an-hour! Will kill him slowly, without his seeing anything, without his smelling anything, without his feeling anything but sleepiness. Will kill him and tell the whole College of Surgeons nothing, if they examine him after death, but that he died of apoplexy or congestion of the lungs! What do you think of *that*, my dear lady, in the way of mystery and romance? Is our harmless Stout Friend as interesting *now* as if he rejoiced in the terrible popular fame of the Arsenic and the Strychnine which I keep locked up there? (p. 642)

Unlike arsenic or strychnine, therefore, Le Doux's chemical substance will deceive the anatomist's gaze. The motif of poison thus discreetly introduces the world of dissection into the narrative, offering us an image of the body seen from inside – a body opened and examined by medical professionals and subjected to the medical gaze. Although the word «dissection» never appears, as in the case of Gwilt's husband in which the dissecting activity remains concealed under the term «examination of the body» (p. 530),<sup>7</sup> «Our Stout Friend» works in tandem with the specimens exhibited in Le Doux's office, building up a Gothic network linked with medical research. Despite Le Doux's claims that his sanatorium proposes a modern and gentle treatment of its inmates, his specimens evoke the high number of dissections performed on insane patients in the eighteenth

6 From the thirteenth century autopsies were ordered in legal proceedings when death from poison was suspected (Reiser 1981, p. 11).

7 As Elizabeth Hurren explains, the word «dissection» long remained concealed behind that of «anatomical examination» (Hurren 2012, p. 28).

century and throughout the nineteenth century, Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) in France conducting around 250 «openings» to prove the absence of lesion and justify his moral treatment.<sup>8</sup> The rise of autopsies with the work of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828) and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1766-1832) or François-Joseph Victor Broussais (1772-1838), all looking for the seats of diseases (see Gall, Spurzheim 1812, vol. 2 ; Broussais 1828), shows how Collins's novels found their source of inspiration in medical research and the development of mental physiology. In addition, modelled on Charles Reade's Dr. Sampson in *Hard Cash*, and compared, like Sampson, to William Harvey (1578-1657) and Edward Jenner (1749-1823), who respectively discovered the circulation of blood and the vaccination against smallpox, both practising many dissections, Le Doux claims he can not only prove Allan Armadale mad («to assert that he exhibited symptoms of mental alienation after your marriage») but also incurable – which would demand an autopsy: «I can certify his brain to have been affected by one of those mysterious disorders, eminently incurable, eminently fatal, in relation to which medical science is still in the dark» (Sutherland 1995, p. 634).

When Gwilt eventually uses «Our Stout Friend» to poison Armadale, she realizes Armadale and Midwinter have changed rooms. She rescues Midwinter and commits suicide, inhaling the toxic air. As Le Doux had foretold, the medical diagnosis is mistaken, and the conclusion that Gwilt died of apoplexy suggests that an autopsy has certainly been practised on the villainess's corpse. As this example shows, therefore, the introduction of drugs as a criminal weapon in narratives such as *Armadale* goes beyond mere references to celebrated cases of female poisoners. Poisons take readers into the world of dissection and anatomical research, showing the body that beauty specialists model and shape through the looking-glass: opened up to the gaze of doctors, subjected to their blades, the body, as anatomical object, participates in the construction of horror. However, it refuses to deliver its secrets – the villains' poisons remaining undetectable. Lydia Gwilt, whose smooth appearances never betray her criminal nature, remains a sealed body – an intriguing corpse.

Looking at such sometimes marginal references to the world of anatomy and images of the body dissected may thus enable critics to understand why the sensation novel was not solely condemned on the grounds of its mechanical plots and use of repetition – matching therefore the common belief that popular genres, from the rise of the Gothic as a popular genre, perverted the «tastes» of the (feminine) public (see Townshend, Wright 2014, p. 55). The study of references or allusions to the world of anatomy in novels such as *Armadale* lays bare the corporeality of the

8 Pinel will eventually discover lesions, leading him to believe some of his patients were incurable (Goldstein 2001, p. 90).

body on which sensation fiction capitalized and which was denounced by critics on account of its «morbid taste». Like the anatomical gaze of Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe, the sensation genre's stress on bodies subverted bourgeois literary taste, explaining why the «surgical» novels were condemned, just as women were regularly forbidden entry to medical museums. The «nakedness of truth», as Lady Blessington put it when she first entered the Specola museum in Florence and saw the displayed anatomical Venuses and «the disgusting details of the animal economy in all its hideous and appalling nakedness and truth» (Blessington 1839, p. 215), were as much shocking to the Victorians as popular fiction promising to uncover the secrets and bodies of the Victorian angels of the house.

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## «You're obliged to have recourse to bodies» Corporeal Proliferation, Class, and Literary Taste in M.E. Braddon's Revision of *The Outcasts*

Anne-Marie Beller  
(Loughborough University, UK)

**Abstract** The sensation novel was frequently criticised for its corporeality and vulgar depictions of physical violence. M.E. Braddon was identified as a prime offender in this respect, yet Braddon's anonymous writing for the penny fiction market displays considerably more explicit emphasis on corporeality than any of her relatively restrained three-volume novels. In contrast to her middle-class novels, where, as her character Sigismund Smith advises, the emphasis should all be on «one body», Braddon's penny bloods proliferate bodies, in the dual sense of corpses (referred to by Smith in my title) and also through extensive casts of characters and multiple plot-lines. An analysis of the revisions Braddon made to her penny serial *The Outcasts* before its publication in 3 volumes as *Henry Dunbar* elucidates mid-Victorian perceptions of the «vulgarization» of taste and the «classed» nature of genres. Bourdieu's theory of «impure taste» is employed to assess the ways in which Braddon's treatment of «bodies» engages questions of literary taste and negotiates the different generic conventions operating between the penny serial and the 3-volume novel.

**Keywords** Bodies. Class. Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Taste.

Disgust is the paradoxical experience of enjoyment extorted by violence, and enjoyment which arouses horror. This horror, unknown to those who surrender to sensation, results fundamentally from removal of the distance, in which freedom is asserted, between the representation and the thing represented, in short, from *alienation*, the loss of the subject in the object, immediate submission to the immediate present under the enslaving violence of the «agreeable».

(Pierre Bourdieu)

During the 1860s, British literary critics and reviewers conducted a hostile campaign against sensation fiction, a sub-genre of the novel centred on crime and mystery, which was enjoying an unprecedented popularity with readers of all classes. Novels by Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, Rhoda Broughton and others were attacked for their perceived immorality, their aesthetic deficiencies, and for «preaching to the nerves» of the reader (Mansel 1863, p. 482). Janice M. Allan notes that the «determination to 'recognise' and expose sensation fiction as a low and 'coarse'»

form is a prominent feature, not only within the reviews of Braddon, but of the genre as a whole» (Allan 2013, p. 93). An important factor in the denigration of sensation fiction by Victorian critics was their assumption that the genre's emphasis on the physical – that is, on 'sensation' – necessarily rendered it inferior to literature which focused on more cerebral or indeed, spiritual concerns.

Of course, the basis for such an assumption lay in the Victorians' inheritance of a theory of aesthetics codified during the eighteenth century and promulgated by influential thinkers such as the third Earl of Shaftesbury and Immanuel Kant. During the period in which Mary Elizabeth Braddon began her literary career, the key tenets of Kantian aesthetics were being upheld and developed by cultural authorities, men such as G.H. Lewes, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, who were rich in symbolic capital. Moreover, as the novel became an increasingly significant form of imaginative literature, cultural mediators like Lewes and Arnold proceeded to apply judgments of taste based on the artistic ideal of the aesthetic to contemporary fiction, as part of a wider campaign which sought to define and protect a high culture tradition. In *Culture and Anarchy*, for instance, Arnold promotes the disinterestedness of Kantian aesthetics in his theory of culture, arguing for society to be «permeated by thought, sensible to beauty» and, as Allison Pease argues, his «cultural aesthetic continues the project of modern aesthetics to bring individual bodies into the realm of reason through a universal subjectivity based on the idea of culture» (Colini 1993, p. 79; Pease 2000, p. 43). The controversy over sensation fiction during the early years of the 1860s can be seen as part of this appropriation of Kantian ideas of disinterestedness by influential cultural mediators and intellectuals intent on drawing firm boundaries between a nascent yet encroaching mass culture and a high culture tradition of *belles lettres*.

In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the concept of «pure» taste is based on a negation of the pleasure of the senses and a refusal of *aesthesis*, which literally translates as sensation (Bourdieu 1994, p. 486). He writes:

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences. (p. 7)

The mid-Victorian sensation novel – with its emphasis on physical action, the baser aspects of human experience, and sensual pleasure (of the characters and of the reader) – falls inevitably on the wrong side of this opposition between pure and impure. Sensation fiction was frequently criticised

for its insistent corporeality and unwholesome depictions of physical violence and sensuality. Margaret Oliphant, a staunch opponent of sensation fiction, identified Mary Elizabeth Braddon as a prime offender in this line and complained generally about the «fleshly and unlovely» portrayals in women's novels, with their «intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation» (Oliphant 1867, p. 259). Oliphant's comments are directed at Braddon's acknowledged three-volume novels, rather than the anonymous and pseudonymous productions she penned for the penny (and halfpenny) fiction market, which few people beyond Braddon's intimate circle were aware of. Yet these penny bloods display considerably more explicit emphasis on corporeality than any of Braddon's relatively restrained three-volume novels. Not only do they exaggerate the physicality of her more 'respectable' circulating-library fiction through a heightened emphasis on violence, rape, murder, suicide, and seduction, but Braddon's penny bloods proliferate bodies, through extensive casts of characters and multiple plot-lines, as well as in the sense of corpses. Her first novel, *The Trail of the Serpent*, for example, which began life as an obscure penny-part fiction entitled *Three Times Dead*, betrays these origins by the sheer number of corpses that litter its pages. And, as Mark Bennett has astutely noted of this novel: «Braddon's bodies lose any discrete meaning through their very excess within a textual world wherein suicides, factory accidents, murders and the presence of waterlogged corpses in a river [...] are all normative expectations» (Bennett 2011, p. 42). This is typical of penny bloods more generally and the very corporeality of such works is inextricably bound up with the classed experience of their target readers. As Sally Powell has argued, «Penny fiction writers followed the example of social commentators and were keen to evoke in their sensational urban expositions the sights and smells of the human and animal body that pervaded the buying and selling in slum areas» (Powell 2004, p. 47). In this article I will briefly discuss Braddon's relationship to the penny fiction market, before examining *The Outcasts*, a penny serial later revised for the circulating library market as *Henry Dunbar*, and consider the ways in which Braddon's revision of this text (chiefly through the eradication of surplus «bodies») engages questions of class, literary taste, and generic conventions.

The influence of sensational penny fiction, published in working-class periodicals, on the three-volume novels of Braddon, Wilkie Collins, Ellen Wood and other sensation novelists of the 1860s has long been noted. However, the precise nature of this relationship is rarely interrogated, with the result that our current understanding of the dynamics involved remains necessarily limited. For most conservative Victorian critics of the sensation novel, the influence was one of straightforward debasement on the standards of middle-class fiction; an unwelcome intrusion into the drawing room of gratuitous physicality, melodrama, and excess.

W. Fraser Rae admonished Braddon for publishing her «stories of blood and lust, of atrocious crimes» in «three volumes in place of issuing them in penny numbers». By doing so, Rae famously suggested, Braddon had made «the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the drawing room» (Rae 1865, p. 204). J.R. Wise in the *Westminster Review* similarly warned that the sensational «virus» was «spreading in *all* directions», yet the trajectory he describes is significantly a linear and an upward one: «from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume». The source of «disease» is implied to issue upwards from the lower sections of society (Wise 1866, p. 268).

Yet, the extensive revisions Braddon made to her *London Journal* serial *The Outcasts*, before its publication in three-volumes as *Henry Dunbar*, intimate that her relationship to different markets and reading communities in the 1860s is suggestive of a more complex dynamic at work than a simple linear conception of influence. I also want to suggest that corporeality is central to Braddon's respective approach to various classed forms of fiction. Braddon, perhaps more than any of her contemporaries, bridged the gap between the penny fiction and circulating library markets by writing simultaneously for both. Moreover, her publishing practices in the 1860s also belie the linearity implied by Wise's comments, given that the movement of her fiction between various classed formats takes different paths on different occasions. The textual alterations between different versions of her work illuminate Braddon's (and perhaps also wider cultural) views about the differing characteristics and conventions operating in respective sections of the mid-Victorian periodical press.

Serializations of Braddon's fiction appeared in a number of periodicals, ranging from her partner John Maxwell's largely unsuccessful ventures into the working-class market – the ill-fated *Robin Goodfellow*, *The Sixpenny Magazine*, *The Halfpenny Journal*, and *The Welcome Guest* – through more established and popular penny weeklies such as the *London Journal*, to Maxwell's middle-class shilling monthlies *Temple Bar*, *St. James's Magazine*, and *Belgravia*. In addition to the serializations, her three-volume novels were usually followed relatively quickly by cheaper reprints, including the two shilling «yellowbacks» and one volume editions priced variously from 2s 6d to six shillings. Such a range of publishing practices and modes not only testifies to the rapid expansion of the mid-Victorian publishing industry in Britain, but also points to the way in which Braddon's fiction appealed to and was consumed by a wide cross-section of Victorian society, arguably undermining the idea of a strict segregation between the fiction consumed by the working classes and the middle classes.

Braddon's involvement in the penny fiction market was neither as limited nor as straightforward as it sometimes appears. The anonymous serials for her partner, John Maxwell's *Halfpenny Journal* – *The Black Band*, *Oscar Bertrand*, *The White Phantom*, and *The Octoroon* – do not constitute

the full extent of her contribution. *Lady Audley's Secret* began life as a serial in the *Sixpenny Magazine* (after the collapse of *Robin Goodfellow*); it then became a three-decker before going back down the social scale to become a serialisation in the penny weekly *London Journal*. *Aurora Floyd* also ran as a serial in the *London Journal*, subsequent to its appearance in three volumes, and *Run to Earth*, *Rupert Godwin*, and *Three Times Dead* were all penny serials before Maxwell repackaged them for a more upmarket readership.

The novel I focus on in this article, *The Outcasts*, was written as a serial specifically for the *London Journal*, before being reshaped for relatively polite consumption as the three-volume *Henry Dunbar* in 1864, and its journey from one medium to the other is instructive about mid-Victorian class assumptions.<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that by publishing in the working-class journals, and especially by publishing (essentially) the same work as both penny serial and three-volume novel, Braddon justified the hostile critics' assessment of her work as nothing more than what they derogatively termed «kitchen literature». A brief advertisement in the *Standard* in 1863 is succinct in its disdain: «Miss Braddon has commenced writing for the *London Journal*. Her new tale is called 'The Outcasts'. Miss Braddon has found her proper sphere» (Anon. 1863, p. 3). A much longer review of the revised *Henry Dunbar* in the *Examiner*, scathingly entitled «Kitchen Literature», was quick to point out the novel's less than respectable origins:

This is a highly-seasoned dish of tainted meat that has been already contrived and served up for a kitchen dinner by the great chef of the kitchen maids, and is now brought upstairs for the delectation of coarse appetites in the politer world. The story has been appearing in a penny journal for the kitchen under a title relishable [sic] to the readers of Penny Pirates and Female Highwaymen as «the Outcasts». (Anon. 1864a, p. 404)

The metaphor of Braddon's work as «meat» for «coarse appetites» was one which was employed regularly by reviewers to align such fiction with a debased (and debasing) concept of taste. Food and eating metaphors (and particularly reading as the consumption of adulterated or «tainted» food) in contemporary critical reviews also underlined the sensation novel's perceived vulgar corporeality – what Kant referred to as «the taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat» (Meredith 2006, p. 32). As Pamela Gilbert demonstrates, in her seminal study of Victorian women's popular

<sup>1</sup> *The Outcasts: Or, The Brand of Society* ran as a weekly serial in the *London Journal* between 12nd September 1863 and 26th March 1864. It was serialized almost simultaneously in the San Francisco literary magazine *The Golden Era*, from 25th October 1863 to 8th May 1864.

fiction, *Disease, Desire, and the Body*, sensation novels «are presented alternately as food and poison, medicine and illicit drugs, and finally the erotic body and the contaminated body. In all of these metaphors, the text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her» (Gilbert 2005, p. 18). Moreover, it is not only the body of the reader which is constructed as permeable and open to contamination; boundaries between different classes of texts and readers are seen as permeable too. The distinct class boundaries implied in many of the reviews of sensation fiction were becoming increasingly more fluid and less stable within the mid-Victorian publishing market, hence the anxieties that arguably underpin the condemnations of Braddon, who was uncomfortably highlighting such fluidity in reading practices and tastes. Recent work by scholars, notably Andrew King, has demonstrated that the readership of the popular penny magazine *The London Journal* was probably more class-diverse than is sometimes assumed; Jennifer Phegley, for instance, has characterised the *Journal* as «a magazine that catered to upwardly mobile working- and lower-middle-class readers» (King 2004; Phegley 2011, p. 63). The extensive debates over sensation fiction during the 1860s reflect, in part, such anxieties regarding cross-class reading habits and shared literary tastes.

In an 1862 letter to her literary mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon admitted «I do an immense deal of work which nobody ever hears of, for Halfpenny and penny journals. This work is most piratical stuff, and would make your hair stand on end, if you were to see it» (Wolff 1974, p. 11). What is interesting about Braddon's statement here is not so much her acknowledgement of the literary shortcomings of such work, but the seemingly confident assumption that Bulwer would not see it, which points suggestively to the perceived fixed separatedness of the markets for working-class and middle-class periodicals, even if this was not always the reality. In supplying details of the kind of penny fiction she is engaged in writing anonymously, Braddon symbolically performs an action of cross-class circulation of literary material. Furthermore, she merely assumes that Bulwer would not be reading low-brow magazine fiction and the conjecture is a questionable one given the increasing mutability of mid-Victorian reading practices discussed above. As Louis James has noted of penny blood fiction:

Although its sensationalism could be cruder than middle-class reading, it is increasingly difficult to identify such literature as 'working class', in part because by the late nineteenth century the divisions between classes were easing. The 1870 Education Act, in particular, brought a more uniform literacy, and mass publication pulps [...] were aimed at a broad audience. (James 2011, p. 875)

Braddon's early career coincided with the initial stages of these shifts, and perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of her literary production



in the 1860s and 1870s is the way in which it straddled different types of literary markets, thereby reaching wide readerships across class and economic divides which, while not wholly unique, was distinctly unusual. During these decades, as Gilbert points out, «the carnivalesque popular cultural forms of the broadsheet and the ballad begin to give way to half-penny and penny-dreadful literature which cannot be separated in content from the circulating library novels of the middle classes, although the packaging remains ostentatiously distinct» (Gilbert 2005, p. 17). Braddon's repackaging of her penny fiction for a more upmarket readership uncomfortably highlighted this fact, since the content between the two genres remained essentially the same, despite her substantial revisions.

At the same time that Braddon was revising *The Outcasts* for publication as *Henry Dunbar*, she was also writing *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), her first bid for serious artistic recognition and the novel by which, so she informed Bulwer, Braddon felt she must «sink or swim» (Wolff 1974, p. 25). This is an interesting juxtaposition because *The Doctor's Wife* contains an extended self-reflexive meditation on the writing, production, and consumption of print culture, which I would argue feeds into her revision of *The Outcasts*. In *The Doctor's Wife* Braddon introduced Sigismund Smith, a penny fiction author whose entertaining views on the literary marketplace offer interesting insights into contemporary perceptions about the different generic conventions governing classed forms of literature. Smith enjoys his work, producing sensational reading for the masses, though he ruefully admits that «the penny public require excitement», a predilection which means «you're obliged to have recourse to bodies». Such excitement becomes addictive, Smith implies, so that «in penny numbers one body always leads on to another, and you never know, when you begin, how far you might be obliged to go» (Pykett 2008, p. 194). By contrast, he tells us, the middle-class market is satisfied with one corpse, and it is Smith's ambition to become the author of «a legitimate three-volume romance, with all the interest concentrated on one body» (p. 194). Significantly, in turning her own penny serial, *The Outcasts*, into a «legitimate» triple-decker, Braddon follows Smith's prescriptions to the letter. By eliminating a number of central characters and virtually half of the plot of the serialized version (including a second murder narrative), Braddon ensures that in the 'respectable' three-volume *Henry Dunbar* the focus is all on «one body». Smith's various observations on fiction writing and the expectations of different types of readers can be read therefore as a self-reflexive commentary on Braddon's concurrent revision of *The Outcasts* and the beliefs governing that process. In both novels she is arguably reflecting on her own positioning within Victorian print culture and wider questions about sensational literature and the author function.

The increasing fluidity of Victorian class distinctions, apparent in Braddon's reissuing of a penny serial as a three-volume novel, is also present as a thematic concern within *The Outcasts* and *Henry Dunbar*. Indeed,



the performativity of class is crucial to the plot, since the story hinges on the lower-class criminal, Joseph Wilmot's ability to successfully pass for a man of superior social position when he assumes the place of the rich banker, Henry Dunbar, whom he has murdered. The novel is also preoccupied with questions of identity, which feed in to the issues of textual identity produced by Braddon's rewriting. For example, when Joseph Wilmot transforms himself from shabby reprobate to respectable gentleman, class identity and social position are implied to be merely outward signifiers which may be assumed at will. Wilmot has his beard shaved off and «his ragged moustache trimmed into the most aristocratic shape»:

So far as the man's head and face went, the transformation was perfect. He was no longer a vagabond. He was a respectable, handsome-looking gentleman, advanced in middle age. Not altogether unaristocratic-looking. The very expression of his face was altered. The defiant sneer was changed into a haughty smile; the sullen scowl was now a thoughtful frown. (Beller 2010, p. 36)

Braddon implies that, rather than simply disguise himself outwardly with the signifiers of upper-middle class appearance, Wilmot actually inhabits a differently classed social body or even, in Bourdieu's terms, *habitus*. As Gilbert has suggested, «[t]he body, uncertainly poised between nature and culture, practices and signifies identity» (Gilbert 2005, p.15). Wilmot epitomizes this process, his social identity throughout the novel contingent on the outward appearance, manner, and conduct of his body. He completes his identity transformation by donning a new outfit of clothes, carefully selected for their conformity to upper-middle class notions of good taste:

He chose no gaudy colours, or flashily-cut vestments [...] It was the dress of a middle-aged gentleman; fashionable, but scrupulously simple, quiet alike in colour and in cut. [...] The man's manner was as much altered as his person. He had entered the shop at eight o'clock that morning a blackguard as well as a vagabond. He left it now a gentleman; subdued in voice, easy and rather listless in gait, haughty and self-possessed in tone. (Beller 2010, p. 37)

Just as Wilmot performs an identity that is socially superior to the one allotted to him, Braddon's text similarly assumes a 'higher' social status in its journey from penny serial to circulating library three-decker. Echoing Wilmot's metamorphosis, Braddon strips her *London Journal* serial of the most obvious indicators of its lower-class origins (which I will discuss below), thereby highlighting the idea that genre itself may be simply a question of external packaging, wherein the essential textual substance remains much the same.

While the three-volume version of the story retains the tropes of class performativity and the instability of social roles, what is significantly reduced in the revision process is the original text's emphasis on corporeality and the proliferation of bodies (both living and dead). The revisions Braddon made to her story, before its release as *Henry Dunbar*, were all designed to make the three-volume novel less melodramatic and supposedly more suited to middle-class tastes. The most important of these changes is the elimination of one of the main plot strands in the *London Journal* version, involving Laura Dunbar's husband, Philip Jocelyn. In *The Outcasts*, Jocelyn is one of the main characters and the serial's first instalment is concerned solely with him. He is also the heir to an Earldom, and in the course of the serialization becomes Lord Haughton – a literal rags-to-riches story, given that the opening chapter finds him living in poverty in a London slum with his gin-addicted wife. This melodramatic plot strand involves Jocelyn's secret first marriage to a woman of inferior social position, and the murder of his wife on the eve of his marriage to the wealthy Laura Dunbar. The young son of this ill-fated first marriage is stolen, and restored to his father in time to be identified as the rightful heir to the Earldom, just before Philip Jocelyn dies. Braddon cut this entire part of the plot and later used it for her short story «Lost and Found» (1866). Other variations include the character of Major Vernon who, in the *London Journal* serial, goes by the more comically melodramatic pseudonym Herr Von Volterchoker, and is responsible for hiding Lord Haughton's son, while blackmailing the Earl over his first wife's murder. The name change is characteristic of Braddon's more general eradication of overly melodramatic elements common to the penny serial. Additionally, the fact that Vernon / Von Volterchoker becomes a much more minor character in the revised three-volume version of the novel (as does Philip Jocelyn) helps to focus the preponderance of narrative attention on to one protagonist, the eponymous Henry Dunbar, alias Joseph Wilmot. The significance of this shift will be considered below.

Recalling Sigismund Smith's comments that the penny fiction reader demands numerous corpses, *The Outcasts* features two separate murders, a gruesome fatal horse-racing accident, the shooting of a horse, and a number of natural deaths of both minor and central characters. Moreover, there is a decided focus on the physical aspects of death in contrast to the revised *Henry Dunbar*, where the one murder that is retained is not described for the reader but rather happens 'off-stage'. In *The Outcasts*, bodies are insistently brought under the reader's gaze in a way that emphasizes the text's preoccupation with corporeality. Characters in *The Outcasts* are also regularly forced to an awareness of the physical, in the same way that Braddon's readers are unable to avert their gaze from the spectacle of bodies. Laura Dunbar describes to her new husband Philip Jocelyn the horror of viewing a woman found dead on their wedding day, un-

aware at this point that the dead woman is actually her husband's first wife:

He [...] led me out from this house into the dark night, and led me on until we came to a stream of black, troubled water, and on the flat shore beside that troubled water there lay the body of a woman, drowned, Philip—drowned, poor wretched creature. The moon had been hidden by the clouds until that moment, but in that moment the clouds swept away, and I saw the woman's face. (Braddon 1863-1864, vol. 40, p. 105)

Despite the darkness of the night, the movement of the clouds and the brightness of the moon illuminate the woman's corpse at the crucial moment, and this may be seen as figurative of the text's voyeuristic tendencies more generally. Braddon's serial works on the visceral emotions of the reader, inviting somatic responses of disgust, excitement, revulsion. In Bourdieu's theorization of taste, the cultured «taste of reflection» occurs at the level of the intellect rather than embodied materiality (Bourdieu 1994, p. 490). Braddon's novel, where the bodily appetites of both the characters and the readers are foregrounded, is therefore relegated to the space of the impure and vulgar because it lacks the necessary distance from the corporeal that defines «pure taste».

By contrast, the murder in *Henry Dunbar* is treated quite differently to that of Agatha Jocelyn in *The Outcasts*. Where the moonlight illuminates the dead woman's face in the latter, forcing Laura Dunbar to view the horror, in *Henry Dunbar*, the corpse of the murdered banker is preserved suggestively from the reader's eyes: «All this time the body of the murdered man lay on a long table in a darkened chamber at the Forester's Arms. The rigid outline of the corpse was plainly visible under the linen sheet that shrouded it; but the door of the dread chamber was locked» (Beller 2010, p. 71). Undeniably, this episode retains the sensationalism of penny bloods, as it similarly continues the emphasis on corporeality. However, here the corpse significantly is «shrouded» and located in a «darkened» place. Although the outline is «plainly visible», physical death is yet distanced and shielded from the reader's direct gaze. Just as the middle-class sensation novel eschews the working class slums for a more genteel and domestic milieu than penny bloods, so too does Braddon's revision here imply that sensational fiction that aims to masquerade as so-called respectable literature must veil the more sordid and vulgar aspects of life to a greater degree. The «shrouded» corpse in *Henry Dunbar* operates as an effective metaphor for the cosmetic alterations that occur between Braddon's penny fiction and her circulating library work.

It is not just in the matter of corpses that *The Outcasts* inscribes its 'vulgar' status, but in a graphic insistence on the body and degradation more generally. In the opening chapters, Philip Jocelyn tramps home to his filthy garret in a slum, with bread and meat for his young son who is at the point

of starvation. The descriptions of the London slums, the humble garret, and the characters themselves, all focus on the corporeal. For instance, the first introduction to Jocelyn's wife, Agatha, insistently emphasises the physical aspects of her degradation: «A woman was lying on the bed – a woman who was young and had once been pretty, but whose bloated face bore upon it the most horrible evidence that a woman's face can bear, the fatal stamp which brands the besotted countenance of a drunkard» (Braddon 1863-1864, vol. 39, p. 162). These early chapters are marked by «the sights and smells of the human and animal body» referred to by Powell as characterizing the penny blood (Powell 2004, p. 47); Braddon details the physical sensations of extreme hunger, and the smells and sounds, as well as the visual dejection of the Jocelyns' hovel, where the «besotted wretch [Agatha, is] sleeping off the fumes of gin» (Braddon 1863-1864, vol. 39, p. 162). Faces and bodies bear the imprint of their physical sufferings; the narrator states of Jocelyn that «[d]espair was stamped as plainly upon the man's face as if the letters that make up the word had been branded upon his forehead by a red-hot iron» (vol. 39, p. 162). And in a trope that is carried through (in a more modified form) to the revised three-decker, identity is repeatedly shown to be inherently bound up with the physical body. A prime example of this in *The Outcasts* is Philip Jocelyn's decision to get Herr Von Volterchoker to tattoo his young son, Georgey, with an earl's coronet and the initials G.J. Only by literally inscribing the boy's true identity on the body can Jocelyn later reclaim his son and prove his claim to the Haughton title and wealth. By eliminating Philip Jocelyn's story from the revised version of the novel, Braddon eradicates these scenes and, in doing so, significantly alters the milieu of her text. The filthy slums and gypsy camps of *The Outcasts*, more familiar territory for the penny blood, are removed to leave the respectable London banking house and country estates of *Henry Dunbar*.

The change to the title itself is also significant. The plural title of *The Outcasts* is fitting for the serial, reflecting the extensive cast of characters and multiple plot threads more typical of penny fiction; the plurality of bodies signifies the way in which proliferation and excess are the keynotes. The shift to the singular *Henry Dunbar* can arguably be read as an attempt to contain the text, to limit its dangerous proliferation. For the revised text's focus on one body (as Sigismund Smith prescribes) applies not only to the one corpse (the murdered Henry Dunbar, as opposed to the multiple deaths and murders in *The Outcasts*) but also to one protagonist, thereby providing a focus on the individual subject more appropriate to middle-class forms of the novel. This is epitomized, for example, in the popularity with the Victorians of the *bildungsroman*, which as Michael Minden has argued, is «overt in its representation of the humanist subject» (Minden 2011, p. 12). Braddon's eradication of surplus bodies, therefore, might be read as a shift from the penny blood's emphasis on collectivity

rather than individualism, and on proliferation (of bodies and identities), to a centralizing of the liberal humanist subject typical of the bourgeois novel. That Braddon deliberately revised her penny serial to conform to these tenets suggests her acceptance of the dominant middle-class views about the aesthetic ideals and function of the novel, as well as her desire to position her own (revised) work within a genre marked by superior cultural capital. As the 1860s progressed, Braddon's assessment of the differing generic conventions and tastes operating within the mid-Victorian literary marketplace became progressively challenged, leading to an increased scepticism regarding the supposed different tastes of the respective classes.

In the early 1860s, Braddon had few illusions about the nature of her hack work for the *Halfpenny Journal*; to Bulwer she complained that «the amount of crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning & general infamy required [by the penny serial reader] is something terrible» (Wolff 1974, p. 126). Increasingly, though, she came to realise that this was perhaps also true of many of her more «respectable readers», since she despondently acknowledged to Bulwer Lytton that *Henry Dunbar*, which she herself saw as aesthetically inferior, sold more copies than *The Doctor's Wife*, to which she gave her «best thoughts» (p. 28). In a later letter, Braddon is found complaining about the «circulating library reader whose palette [sic] requires strong meat, & is not very particular as to the quality thereof» (p. 14). The comment suggestively echoes her earlier stigmatisation of the penny-fiction reader and implies Braddon's increasing scepticism of conventional views concerning the differing tastes of the classes, as well as dominant claims regarding the essential distinction between penny fiction and more middle-brow forms of literature. As Andrew King has suggested, «Braddon was suspicious that the zones were not after all separated in terms of literary techniques – which renders all the more urgent the discovery of a way to keep them apart so as to justify their differing cultural status» (King 2004, p. 40).

Despite the concessions Braddon made to what she clearly assumed were the different conventions and tastes operating between the penny serial and the three-volume novel, not all reviewers appreciated her efforts. A critic for the conservative *Morning Post*, in a more general discussion of Braddon's work, signalled his preference for the earlier penny serial version *The Outcasts* over the later, more respectable *Henry Dunbar*: «'The Outcasts' (for it would be unjust to Miss Braddon to refer to the mutilated edition published under the title of 'Henry Dunbar', in order to disguise the odour of popular penny literature from aristocratic nostrils in the western world) was a great achievement of genius» (Anon. 1865, p. 2). The reference to «aristocratic nostrils» is surprisingly suggestive of the reviewer's scorn for the disdain in which penny fiction is held by the cultural élite. It is perhaps even more unexpected that a middle-class reviewer would

uphold Braddon's original penny serial as a work of «genius», while dismissing the revised three-volume version as «mutilated». Similarly, some critics who were seemingly unaware of the previous incarnation of *Henry Dunbar* in a penny magazine did not perceive any significant difference between this novel and those novels Braddon had written with a middle-class readership firmly in mind. Indeed, a reviewer of *Henry Dunbar* for *The Times* concluded that: «In spite of haste, and in spite of mistakes, we are inclined to think that this last novel is not in any respect inferior to the same author's previous works, while in method of treatment and in moral elevation it belongs to a higher style of art than she has yet approached» (Anon. 1864b, p. 4). This validation of a work originally written for the penny fiction market, by reviewers in middle-class London newspapers, arguably complicates dominant scholarly views of the monolithic nature of the attacks on sensation fiction, which are primarily based on the more famous and often-cited critiques by W. Fraser Rae in the *North British Review* and Henry Mansel in the *Quarterly Review*. Examination of reviews and articles outside of the élite quarterlies suggests that middle-class views about literary sensationalism were far from uniform. One reviewer was content to pronounce *Henry Dunbar*

one of the happiest efforts of this talented writer [...] unquestionably taking higher ground as regards artistic construction and skilful delineation of character. Its superiority in these two important essentials to the majority of Miss Braddon's earlier attempts in the same direction, is indeed [...] marked. (Anon. 1864c, p. 697)

The reference here to Braddon's «artistic construction» and «skilful delineation of character» contrasts sharply with the *Morning Post*'s reviewer's complaint about the «mutilation» of the original serial version. Such disparity of critical opinion points to the complexity of the mid-Victorian aesthetic discourse on the novel and the frequently overlooked lack of consensus about the aesthetic position of sensation fiction within the larger literary-critical establishment. It is intriguing that of all this text's multiple identities – as a serial in the *London Journal*, a serial in the *The Golden Era*, a three volume novel, plus multiple theatrical dramatizations of both versions (for example, an adaption of *The Outcasts* by Hazelwood and of *Henry Dunbar* by Tom Taylor) – the most respectable version (*Henry Dunbar* in 3 volumes), for the *Morning Post* reviewer at least, is the «mutilated» version. One might suggest that the literary construction of the humanist subject of middle-class fiction is reliant on such a mutilation, if not eradication, of bodies.

Braddon's revision of her penny serial into a circulating novel for the middle classes illustrates that the key difference between the two classed genres was largely cosmetic rather than a matter of intrinsically divergent



tastes. An emphasis on corporeality – on bodies, in the double sense of physical bodies and textual bodies – is arguably a primary connecting feature between working-class penny bloods and the 1860s sensation novel; the distinction is simply a matter of the degree of prominence. Braddon's revision process demonstrates her adherence at this point in her career to commonly held beliefs about the aesthetics of the novel in the period, and, by reducing the number of «bodies» in her three-volume novel, she attempts to conform to those principles. However, the decidedly mixed reception of *Henry Dunbar* by middle-class critics points to the complexity of literary discourse in a crucial period of transition for the novel. With the rise of mass readerships and a more competitive and commercially-driven publishing industry, the perceived vulgar taste of the 'lower' classes was feared to be infecting the middle-class literary body. In the 1860s, theories of culture – of the function of literature and of criticism – and notions of culture as a political concept were in their infancy. The sensation fiction controversy contributed to the formation of such ideas and authors like Braddon, who came to represent the vulgarization of middle-class literary taste, often suffered, in terms of their critical reception and reputation, as casualties in the nascent war for cultural control.

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## «Sensational nonsense» Edward Lear and the (Im)purity of Nonsense Writing

Raffaella Antinucci  
(Università degli Studi «Parthenope», Napoli, Italia)

**Abstract** The article explores Edward Lear's contribution to the Victorian aesthetic debate, characterized by a marked resistance to the literary use of sensation (epitomised in Wilkie Collins' fiction), and in which, according to Bourdieu and to many critics after him, the so-called cultural divide between high art and mass culture originated. In particular, the analysis verifies the degree of 'impureness' of Lear's nonsense, a hybrid genre that has often been apprehended as literarily and socially subversive. After a brief discussion of the main features of this genre and its acknowledged 'parodic' quality, the study examines Lear's engagement with 'high' and 'low' literary conventions in «Growling Eclogue» and «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos» (whose second part was expressly written at Wilkie Collins' suggestion), with the aim of investigating if and to what extent Lear's crossing of genres and use of bizarre and at times grotesque literary images blur (and question) the boundaries between élite and popular culture.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Nonsensical Pastiche and 'High' Literary Genres: «The Growling Eclogue». – 3 Nonsensical Sensation: «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos».

**Keywords** Aesthetic debate. Edward Lear. Nonsense. Sensationalism.

### 1 Introduction

Natural illustrator, travel writer, landscape painter, nonsense poet – in all his artistic *personae*, the figure of Edward Lear conjures up a variety of contradictory images, which reflect the manifold facets of his unique personality. In one of his popular limericks, he famously referred to himself as «A Man who lived on the Border». Indeed, in both his life and artistic career, Lear repeatedly defied most Victorian social and aesthetic conventions.

For all their mirth and liveliness, his correspondence and diaries convey the impression of a remarkable character often confined in a liminal space: his social alienation and predilection for the children's company at Knowsley Hall, the seat of the Earl of Derby, his loneliness as a single man, his financial insecurity, his despair at the frequent epileptic fits which he nevertheless managed to keep secret, and the sense of uprootedness that permeated his life abroad, are powerfully revealed also in his poetical and visual self-portraits. Lear's artistic endeavours are equally marked

by an inherent hybridization of forms, media and cultures, which include «animal portraiture», watercolours, multi-media travel books – with the incorporation of texts, lithographs and musical scores – illustrated poetry and «nonsense» botany. In truth, it is as «the Laureate of nonsense» (Morphey 1953, p. 9) that Lear is best remembered. In tracing literary nonsense's origins back to the twelfth century, Noel Malcolm states that as an English literary phenomenon this genre possessed «a peculiarly close relationship – largely a parodic one – to the 'high' literary conventions of its day» (Malcolm 1997, p. 4).

In this regard, my paper intends to explore Lear's contribution to the Victorian aesthetic debate, which was characterized by a marked resistance to the literary use of sensation – epitomized in Wilkie Collins's fiction –, and in which, according to Bourdieu and many critics after him, the so-called cultural divide between high art and mass culture originated. The refusal of 'impure' taste and *aesthesis* (sensation) is generally thought to have emerged in the period of the European Romanticism, stemming from Kant's distinction, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), between 'empirical' and 'pure' aesthetic judgements. Since the former are understood as subjective judgements of sense, while the latter only can be considered judgements of taste proper, Kant's framework establishes an implied aesthetical hierarchy within a process of taste formation that from a sociological point of view seems to favour the 'reflective' quality of 'high', upper- and middle-class judgement over the (supposed) merely sensuous taste of the popular classes. Although such an interpretation, advanced by Bourdieu, does not fully consider the fact that «classes and their cultures are always more complexly interwoven» (Wayne 2014, p. 106), it nevertheless foregrounds Kant's seminal attack against 'sensation': «The universal communicability of a pleasure carries with it in its very concept that the pleasure is not one of enjoyment, from mere sensation, but must be derived from reflection; and thus aesthetical art, as the art of beauty, has for standard the reflective Judgement and not sensation» (Bernard 1914, p. 187).

Among the British Romantic poets, Wordsworth has been the one most frequently acknowledged as the founder of the divide between high and popular culture, or, in Kantian terms, between «the taste of reflection» and «the taste of sense». His status as a «poet of reflection» – that Arthur Hallam famously contrasted to Tennyson as a «poet of sensation» (Armstrong 1972, p. 89) – originated both in his aesthetics of sensation elevated through the powers of contemplation and thought, and in his numerous invectives against the most popular literary genres of his age – «frantic novels», «German Tragedies» and gothic stories – which, as he famously claimed in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, exploited and nourished «the degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation» (Stafford 2013, pp. 99-100). At the same time, sensation is so central in Wordsworth's theory of poetry as a «history or science of feeling» (p. 200) that contemporary critics like

Arnold and Pater in different ways regarded his work as distinctly sensuous, hence 'impure' to a certain extent, and contributed to fostering the alternate image of Wordsworth as a «poet of feeling». However, as noted by Noel Jackson, Wordsworth's conception of aesthetic experience is more dialectical than binomial or simply reflective. In his attempt «to accommodate bodily sensation within reflective mental activity» (Jackson 2008, p. 200), Wordsworth blurs as forcefully as he imposes the distinction between the modes of élite and popular literary enjoyment, inaugurating alternative legacies that variously eroded this cultural opposition in the Victorian era.

By reading Lear's poetry against this theoretical background, the present study aims to verify the degree of 'impureness' of Lear's nonsense, a hybrid genre that has often been apprehended as literarily and socially subversive. After a brief discussion of the main features of this genre and its acknowledged 'parodic' quality, I will examine Lear's engagement with 'high' and 'low' literary conventions in «Growling Eclogue» and «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos» respectively, with the aim of investigating if and to what extent Lear's crossing of genres and use of bizarre and at times grotesque literary images blur (and question) the boundaries between élite and popular culture.

## 2 Nonsensical Pastiche and 'High' Literary Genres: «The Growling Eclogue»

Any discussion of the place Lear's nonsense poetry holds in the Victorian aesthetical debate inevitably brings the focus back to the very essence of nonsense. As a cursory examination of the critical literature on this form reveals, it is a very elusive category, for it can designate at the same time «a stylistic device, a literary mode, and a genre» (Tigges 1988, p. 2). Even if limericks are generally regarded as the most nonsensical of Lear's verses (p. 141), Lear's repertoire of nonsense writing covers poetry, prose and illustration, comprising such diverse forms as nonsense songs, eclogues, short stories, alphabets, recipes and botany, typically accompanied by illustrations. This variety has challenged and broadened the critical interpretation of nonsense as a proper genre, of which, when not considered the father, Lear certainly remains an inescapable model.

From being considered just like 'entertainment' for children, a mere aesthetic fancy or a «dreamland» (cf. Cammaerts 1926, p. 32; Colley 1993, pp. 1-45), nonsense has been gradually differentiated from other literary genres such as satire, light verse, nursery rhymes and the joke (cf. Hildebrandt 1970; Tigges 1988), and thus classified, investigated and even 'anatomised' (cf. Tigges's *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, 1988)

in its several linguistic and rhetorical constituents (cf. Sewell 1952; Stewart 1978; Lecercle 1994; Parsons 1994). Despite the diversity and at times incompatibility of their hermeneutical perspectives, most critics agree that literary nonsense does not designate a meaningless text, i.e., a text with **no** sense. Rather it defines an artistic form organized around a balance between meaning and its absence, which can inform the whole work or simply appear as an aesthetic device within a playful framework. Crucially, for the nonsense to emerge it is necessary that the tension between the two (or more) contradictory meanings remains unresolved. It follows that nonsense is built on paradox, viz., the presence of two irreconcilable utterances that stand side by side. In challenging the law of noncontradiction, nonsense seemingly partakes in the relativistic overturning of traditional doctrines that laid its philosophical foundations in J.S. Mill's *System of Logic* (1843). As Lecercle clarifies, «a nonsense text requires to be read on two levels at once – two incompatible levels: not 'x means A', but 'x is both A and, incoherently, B'. In other words, nonsense deals not in symbolism but in paradox» (Lecercle 1990, p. 20).

From this perspective, nonsense also approximates to Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of «heteroglossia» understood as a plurality of meanings and voices. Moreover, the violence, laughter and the dynamics of social control exposed in Lear's limericks connect nonsense with the Bakhtinian definition of «the carnival», which celebrates the «temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order (absence of boundaries); [...] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions» (Bakhtin 1968, p. 51). Often used to understand the link between high and low culture, Bakhtin's categories of the carnivalesque and the grotesque can be effectively employed in the exploration of Lear's topsyturvydom and 'impure' imagery (which will be the subject of the last part of the present study), inasmuch as they are relevant for the majority of nonsense 'markers'. Besides its semantic indeterminacy, Tigges identifies three more defining features of nonsense, which encapsulate some characteristics that had long attracted critical attention: «lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature» (Tigges 1988, p. 55). Notable nonsense strategies comprehend reversals and inversions, imprecision, gibberish, the use of puns, portmanteaus, and neologisms, faulty cause and effect, simultaneity, arbitrariness, picture/text inconsistency, and misappropriation.

A more controversial aspect in the characterization of nonsense, and one which is central to the examination of Lear's aesthetic stance, is its 'parodic', hence inter-textual and rhizomatic tendency (cf. Palumbo 2009), alluded to in Malcolm's above quotation. The tradition of interpreting nonsense, in T.S. Eliot's terms, as «a parody of sense» (Eliot 1942, p. 53) was inaugurated by Strachey who distinguished between vulgar parody

or travesty – which «takes some noble poem, and for its idea, thoughts and images, substitutes the writer's own low and vulgar fancies, which he couples as far as possible with the words of the original which he thus outrages» (Strachey 1888, p. 353) – and Lear's parody «in which the comic writer gives you real fun of his own, while clothing it in the style of some great author, but without any mere employment of his words, unless it be in so far as they are taken to express that style» (p. 354). It is undeniable that nonsense engages in a critical dialogue with several 'high' and 'low' forms of literary enjoyment, ranging from children's literature to Romantic and contemporary poetry, from nursery-rhyme to sensation fiction. It must be said that if early Victorian literature for children, mainly moralistic and unimaginative, often represents the most prominent (implied) target of Lear's nonsense, many of his compositions for children are neither parodic nor nonsensical and deeply renewed the modes of the genre.

Other critics, especially in more recent times, recognize nonsense parodic properties but are more careful in using the label of parody, on the ground that, being a form shaped on an open tension, nonsense is deliberately purposeless. This critical division partly comes from the heated debate over the nature of parody itself, which revolves around the issues of its censorious or more neutral, renovating power, and its intended target – single text, author or genre. Applying Roland Barthes's distinction in *S/Z*, Lecercle assimilates nonsense more to pastiche than parody proper. While parody «operates through a simple rule of inversion, it is easy recognizable, even blatant [...], and substitutes another controlling voice, the parodist, for the voice of the original author» (Lecercle 1994, p. 173), in pastiche the presence of a model text is equally clear, but the details «do not all point in the same direction» (p. 171). Pastiche thus activates the «polyphony» of nonsense. In this latter case nonsense goes beyond parody and affirms its distinctness as a genre.

As Michael Benjamin Heyman has showed, Lear's writings exhibit examples of both 'pure' parodies and nonsense pastiche, which can offer a first inspection of his manipulation of high and low literary genres. Among the straightforward parodies of a 'low' form Heyman cites «The Alphabet poem» published in *Laughable Lyrics* (1877) and modelled on a popular seventeenth-century alphabet that centred on the image of an apple-pie – which Lear replaces with the obsessive motif of an injured arm. On the 'high' side of the cultural divide, in a letter to Chichester Fortescue dated 12 September 1873 we find an imitation of the first lines of four Tennyson poems that Lear was illustrating, which is revealing of both Lear's «good ear for the texture of Tennyson's verse» (Levi 1991, p. 175) and of his pleasure in subverting literary tones and conventions. Tennyson's «The crag that fronts the evening/ all along the shadowed shore» (Strachey 1911, p. 158) is turned into «Like the Wag who jumps at evening/ All along the sanded floor» (p. 161), while the second example is more



nonsensical in evoking a typical Learian topsy-turveydom by rendering Tennyson's line «To watch the crisping ripples on the beach/ with tender curving lines of creamy spray» (p. 158) with «To watch the tipsy cripples on the beach/ with topsy turvy signs of screamy play» (p. 161). Interestingly, the hypotext for two of Lear's parodies transcribed in the letter is the dedicatory poem «To E.L. on His Travels in Greece» (1853) that Tennyson composed after reading Lear's travel book *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Albania* (1851). Written in four-line verses of iambic tetrameter – the so-called «In Memoriam stanza» – Tennyson's first two quatrains depict in heightened tones the Albanian landscapes explored by Lear (cf. Marroni 2012-13, pp. 45-46):

Illyrian woodlands, echoing falls  
Of water, sheets of summer glass,  
The long divine Peneian pass,  
The vast Akrokeraunian walls,

Tomohrit, Athos, all things fair,  
With such a pencil, such a pen,  
You shadow forth to distant men,  
I read and felt that I was there.  
(Ricks 1989, p. 487)

Lear preserves the rhythm and phonetic pattern of Tennyson's poem but alters its semantic fabric:

Delirious Bulldogs; – echoing calls  
My daughter, – green as summer grass; –  
The long supine Plebeian ass,  
The nasty crockery boring falls; –

Tom-Moory Pathos; – all things bare, –  
With such a turket! such a hen!  
And scrambling forms of distant men,  
O! ain't you glad you were not there!  
(Strachey 1911, p. 161)

Lear's lexical changes transmute the model's 'serious' and lyrical atmosphere into a new poetical form rich in unsophisticated vocabulary and informal syntax, which the author himself justly defines as «parody» (p. 161). As such, it needs its literary reference; if read on its own, Lear's parody becomes 'sheer' nonsense, for, although it shows the semantic incoherence that typifies literary nonsense, it lacks any unresolved tension. Despite its linguistic mockery and reversal of register, Lear's parody is more humor-

ous than 'vulgar' in Strachey's sense, and it does not diminish the unfading admiration for Tennyson's poetry that Lear repeatedly expressed in his correspondence and works.<sup>1</sup> Intertextual references to Thomas Moore, Tennyson and Wordsworth also abound in «The Dong with a Luminous Nose» (cf. Heyman 1999, pp. 28-29; Sewell 1952, pp. 64-69) while echoes of Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson and Arnold can be traced in «Colds are the Crabs» (cf. Byrom 1977, p. 230). In most cases Lear's allusions are veiled and rather convey a genuine predilection for Romantic themes and atmospheres.

If 'pure' parodies are rare in Lear's works, a good instance of his 'nonsensical' engagement with high literary conventions is offered by «The Growling Eclogue», written in Cannes on 8th December 1867 and published posthumously in *The Complete Nonsense Book* edited by Lady Strachey (1912). From its very title, the poem resurrects a classical pastoral genre popularised by Latin poets, notably Virgil and Theocritus, which usually took the form of a short dialogue between two shepherds in a rural environment. Parodical devices can be immediately discerned in the French urban setting, in the Latinization of the names of the two male interlocutors – *Edwardus* and *Johannes* –, and in the adjective connoting the eclogue, «growling», which hints at the triviality of the subject, albeit tainted by an 'impure' undertone of animal aggressiveness. The poem, in fact, revives the convention of having two men opposed in a contest and a third speaker as a judge. In this case, however, the judge is a woman, Catherine Symonds, who is not invited to determine who is the better singer/poet – as in traditional eclogues – but to elect the better 'growler' between her husband, the poet John Addington Symonds, and Edward Lear (by his own admission an impenitent growler):

*J.* – See Catherine comes! To her, to her,  
Let each his several miseries refer;  
She shall decide whose woes are least or worst,  
And which, as growler, shall rank last or first.

*Catherine* – Proceed to growl, in silence I'll attend,  
And hear your foolish growling to the end;  
And when they're done, I shall correctly judge  
Which of your griefs are real or only fudge.  
Begin, let each his mournful voice prepare,  
(And, pray, however angry, do not swear!).  
(Noakes 2002, p. 233)

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Tennyson's second stanza from «all things fair...» is inscribed on the headstone of Lear's grave in Sanremo. Lear also set to music a number of Tennyson's lyrics, collected in two books in 1953 and 1859, and in the Eighties produced about two hundred drawings inspired by Tennyson's poetry, some of which were published posthumously as *Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Illustrated by Edward Lear* (1889).

The ensuing verbal fight between the two opponents is linguistically communicated through the insistent rhyme scheme of couplets (often rhetorical questions) and stanzas of four or six lines in iambic pentameter rhyming AABB and AABBC respectively. The evidence the two contenders provide to support their claims as 'growlers' encompasses prosaic arguments such as French terrible weather and the perils of getting colds and coughs – «Why must I sink all poetry in this prose/ the everlasting blowing of my nose?» –, their respective uncomfortable lodgings, and the ubiquitous presence of insects and noisy dogs, cats and people who interrupt their work – Johannes's writing and Edwardus's painting. In this connection, the fact that the growlers' lamentations chiefly concern animal and natural elements, commonly extolled in pastoral poetry, certainly adds to the parodic effect.

Nevertheless, Lear's «Ekklogg» – as he refers to the poem in his diary (p. 505) – transcends parody in many ways. If on the whole the composition conforms to the linguistic rules of correct spelling and grammar, nonsensical techniques surface in alliterative lines such as the above «she shall decide whose woes are least or worst» and in the tongue-twister-like couplet «In vain amain with pain the pane with this chord/ I fain would strain to stop the beastly discord!» Most importantly, the ending leaves the reader baffled as it is not very clear who eventually «rank[s] last or first» (a nonsensical phrase in its own right). Furthermore, in place of laurels, both growlers are given a punishment of some kind. Catherine's «official dictum» for her husband – «to nurse/ the Baby for seven hours, and nothing worse» – is verbally shorter and, on account of his «poorly» state and younger age – «you're younger than the other cove» –, (implicitly) lighter than the one awaiting Edwardus. Contrary to the reader's expectations, he is 'simply' obliged to return to his daily life. Yet, in Catherine's description, based on his 'growling' account, Edwardus's lot is far from being a pleasant one:

For you, Edwardus, I shall say no more  
 Than that your griefs are fudge, yourself a bore;  
 Return at once to cold, stewed, minced, hashed mutton –  
 To wristbands ever guiltless of a button –  
 To raging winds and sea (where don't you wish  
 Your luck may ever let you catch one fish?) –  
 To make large drawings nobody will buy –  
 To paint oil pictures which will never dry –  
 To write new books which nobody will read –  
 To drink weak tea, on tough old pigs to feed –  
 Till spring-time brings the birds and leaves and flowers,  
 And time restores a world of happier hours.  
 (p. 237)

Edwardus's grim life is evoked through the anaphoric and symmetrical patterns of the lines beginning with the infinitives «To make/paint/write/drink», which, together with the recurrence of negative lexemes like «nobody» and «never», infuse the modulation of a curse poem into the verses. Despite the poem's informing humorous tone, Lear's explicit commentary on the difficulties he was facing in every artistic field – as a painter, travel writer and poet – inevitably betrays a melancholy vein, a hallmark of his (later) poetry that also points to the author's urge to exorcize his financial and professional dissatisfaction. In the final couplet, though, Catherine makes clear that Edwardus's sentence is temporary and the poem closes on the hope that spring will bring a merrier time.

The autobiographical and self-referential elements contained in the final stanza make the poem drift further away from parody towards literary nonsense. In particular, the line «to write new books which nobody will read» greatly amplifies the nonsense force, since we can only see the phrase if we are reading the book. In addition, the reader is concomitantly constructed as an alien – distanced from the mass of those who will not read the book –, obliterated as a «nobody», and 'disembodied' into an intra-textual construct (a «no-body»). As a result, in «The Growling Eclogue» the relationship with the parent genre is neither crucial nor 'meaningful' in the way it was in Lear's imitation of Tennyson's dedicatory poem. However marginal, as a model genre with its codified themes and linguistic conventions, the eclogue is nevertheless integral to the emergence of nonsense, considering that part of the governing tension can only be built on the reader's recognition of the poem's literary references. The unresolved opposition between the two 'grumpy old men' thus mirrors the poem's aesthetic interplay with a high genre that is simultaneously present and absent. On a metanarrative level, we are invited to believe that the poem, like Edwardus, «surely might have some sense»; yet, this remains undisclosed.

«The Growling Eclogue» is suggestive of Lear's aesthetic way of engaging with high literary genres. The formal features of the parent text or literary tradition are first appropriated and subsequently parodied/subverted through the introduction of trivial content and the adoption of nonsensical techniques associated with everyday language and popular literature, thus projecting the eclogue towards a lower cultural edge. At the same time, the poem's resistance to any straightforward decoding, its verbal play, and autobiographical/metanarrative allusions elicit a 'reflective' (in Kantian terms) and more sophisticated response on the reader's part, a response which leaves the text at once on both sides of the cultural divide.

Significantly, in the last decades the reader's active involvement in nonsense aesthetic dynamics has gained new critical consideration and substantially shifted the focus of nonsense studies from the text to its function, or, as John Rieder put it, from what nonsense means to «what it does»

(Rieder 1998, p. 47). This is a key issue for the investigation of nonsense 'impurity' and its connection with the aesthetic of sensation, which of necessity raises the question of Lear's audience and its emotional response.

### 3 Nonsensical Sensation: «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos»

Since their appearance, Lear's nonsense writings – *The Book of Nonsense* (1846), *More Nonsense* (1862), *Nonsense Songs and Stories* (1871), *More Nonsense Songs, Pictures, etc.* (1872), and *Laughable Lyrics* (1877) – have hovered between both sides of the cultural divide: their original intended audience being children, the unexpected success of the books among adults contributed to a shift in attitude towards a form hitherto relegated to the inferior category of the trivial, which in its turn in the last decades of the century resulted in the rise of children's literature – and in the increase in its prestige – furthered by the publication of Carroll's *Alice* books. It is precisely in this period that the depreciative attitude implied in the meaning of the term – according to the OED it was first recorded by Ben Jonson in 1614 with the sense of «spoken or written words which make no sense or convey absurd ideas» (cf. Hildebrandt 1970, pp. 11-17) – began to change, and nonsense was granted serious, 'high' critical appraisal «As a Fine Art» by Edward Strachey in his classical article for *The Quarterly Review* (1888). Paradoxically, the end of the century also marked the 'return' of nonsense to the adult world, where it influenced a number of movements, like Surrealism and Dada, and writers, notably James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and more recently, albeit to a lesser extent, Dr. Seuss and Roald Dahl. Moreover, beyond the borders of literary criticism, nonsense has been fruitfully employed in the field of child theory, psycholinguistics, and language acquisition studies (cf. Harmon 1982; Jenkins 1985).

The dual audience of children and adults represents one of the first boundaries that Lear's works transcended, uniting the two cultural streams of the 'low', folk tradition of ballads and nursery rhymes on the one hand, and the adult, 'literary' tradition of nonsense devices and techniques on the other. Lear's split readership sheds light on another aspect already implied in the understanding of nonsense as parody, that is its multiplicity and proliferation of reading levels. Nonsense resistance to 'closed' readings is further complicated by the presence of a dual implied readership (especially in Lear's later books): the reader's degree of reflective or emotional response is not only textual-determined, but also depends on a series of personal, social and cultural factors, i.e., the reader's encyclopaedia, including the reader's age. In this regard, nonsense ties with the Romantic conception of the child have been the subject of critical appreciation (cf. McGravan 1991); what is relevant to the present discussion, instead, is the multiplying effect that this divide within the readership has on the

nonsense aesthetic enjoyment, especially in relation to Lear's reworking of popular forms.

As a poem like «The Growling Eclogue» suggests, Lear's transmutations of literary formats is both formal and thematic, affecting the text in its combination of phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic constituents. Nevertheless, these textual layers are played against one another with the aim of creating an unresolved tension and eliciting a mixed response. It is not preposterous to claim that in Lear's nonsense a perfect balance between meaning and its absence is (often) paralleled by a balance between aesthetic modes of 'reflection' and 'sensation'. On the one hand, nonsense creates the impression of irrationality through a series of linguistic or semantic deviations that are all the same skilfully devised and logically organized. As such, it has been repeatedly likened to a 'game' with either its own set of arbitrary rules (cf. Sewell 1952) or none (cf. Deleuze 2004); in any case, it is «a game played by a rational, methodical mind» (Noakes 2004, p. 194) which engages and at times strains the (adult) reader's intellectual capacity in the process of textual disambiguation. As a corollary, nonsense is characterized by emotional detachment: «The play- or game-like quality of nonsense also reinforces its avoidance of emotions» (Tigges 1988, p. 54).

On the other hand, nonsense verses are highly rhythmic and melopoetic, and share with 'low' forms of oral tradition, particularly with nursery rhymes, a pronounced musicality. The pervasive use of rhyme, alliteration, puns, assonance and other figures of speech that Northrop Frye associated with the process of «babble» (Frye 1957, p. 275) is aimed at stimulating the reader's aural thus 'sensual', embodied response. Apparently, in Lear's nonsense world events or a character's destiny seem to be dictated by fortuitous combinations of rhyme and metre which undermine the principle of causality: «There was an Old Man of Vesuvius/ Who studied the works of Vitruvius» or «There was a Young Lady of Hull/ Who was chased by a virulent Bull» (Noakes 2002, pp. 83-84). In the majority of Lear's songs, especially the limericks, both aural and visual stimulations are activated (and complicated) by the tension between verses and their illustrations, or, in Frye's terminology, between 'babble' and 'doodle'. In subordinating sense to sound, musicality intensifies nonsense power to produce hedonistic reactions in the reader, both young and adult. Paradoxically, this quality directs nonsense towards Aestheticism and its theorization or 'pure poetry' as a form of art that, in Pater's maxim, aspires to «the condition of music». Such tendency to self-reflexion is not peculiar to poetry, though, since it can be easily discerned in Lear's short stories or «puffles of prose» collected in *Laughable Lyrics*, which reject traditional plot in favour of a kind of narrative 'autogamy'. Beyond their common insistence on formal play and poetic craftsmanship, on calling attention to themselves as language, nonsense and Aestheticism further share a marked refusal to hew to normative Victorian values of moralism and realism.

Nonsense challenge of objective knowledge, its emphasis on the 'sensual' potential of poetry and celebration of artistic autonomy also connect it to the popular (prose) counterpart of Aestheticism, sensation fiction. Although «hardly a trace remains» (Robinson 1952, p. 93) of Lear's life-long friendship with Wilkie Collins – another «rebel against conventions» (Costantini 2008, p. 13) –, the relation between the two men was certainly close, and intensified in the late Seventies and Eighties (cf. Lonoff 1995, pp. 40-41). It is known that Collins was one of the few friends with whom Lear corresponded until his death and also the recipient of a manuscript copy of his last poem, the autobiographical «Some Incidents in the Life of My Uncle Urly» (1886), which the novelist regarded as Lear's best poem (cf. Levi 1995, p. 329). References to Collins's *The Woman in White* appear in Lear's diary – where he recorded the reading of the book in June 1861<sup>2</sup> – and in *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* (1876). A singular aspect of their friendship was their personal resemblance, so striking that Lear was frequently mistaken for his novelist friend. Notwithstanding the personal bond that united their respective 'fathers', certain thematic affinities between nonsense and sensation should be rather ascribed to a common reaction against a whole cluster of contemporary cultural, social and epistemological tensions. The convergence between these seemingly distant genres mainly concerns the use of 'impure' imagery and situations.

Lear's nonsense works are pervaded by a conspicuous anxiety about the body (cf. Parsons 1994, pp. 87-114). Both human and animal characters tend to be uneasy about their physical appearance, and are often confined into abnormal bodies. In particular, Lear persistently exaggerated physical traits he found atypical or unattractive in himself – also recurring in his numerous self-caricatures –, such as his plumpness, short legs, long beard and flat nose. Hyperbole governs the process of body distortion in both linguistic and visual modes of expression. Accordingly, Lear's poetry teems with eccentric figures encumbered by long legs and oversized noses: «There are people with noses which reach to the ground, noses which finish in tassels, noses like trumpets and noses which simply disappear out of sight, and the Dong gathered the bark of the Twangum tree and 'he wove him a wondrous nose'» (Noakes 2004, p. 22). In Lear's limericks such fetishisation of the body is ubiquitous and can work towards diminution too: it affects both the person of Dutton «whose head was as small as a button» and the old man of Koblenz, «the length of whose legs was immense». Lear's cartoons usually tend to emphasize the character's isolation, its sense of inadequacy, and its antagonistic relationship with society, making the deformity even more alarming:

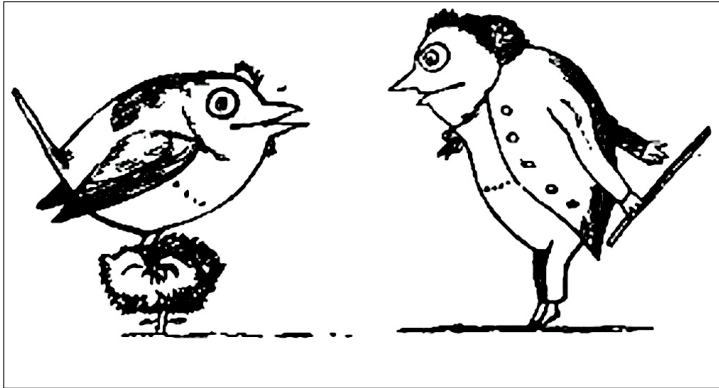
2 Cf. Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Eng. 797.3. Lear's diary records disprove Lonoff's claim that «Lear became a reader of Collins' novels only in 1881» (Lonoff 1995, p. 41).





There was a Young Lady whose eyes,  
 Were unique as to colour and size;  
 When she opened them wide,  
 People all turned aside,  
 And started away in surprise.  
 (Noakes 2002, p. 75)

In some cases, however, illustrations not only contradict the text – for example, the old man of Ancona finds a dog that, contrary to what is stated in the limerick, is anything but small –, but can also expand it, either by portraying a defect not mentioned in the verses – the old person of Cromer, the old man of Whitehaven and the young person in Green, among others, are all drawn with protruding noses – or by creating a disturbing effect by means of visual ‘attributional’ metaphors (cf. Bruni Roccia 2012-2013, p. 115). One of the most interesting instances of this latter mechanism can be detected in cartoons that point to a disquieting affinity between human and animal characters, encouraging an ambiguous emotional response.



There was an Old Man who said, «Hush!  
 I perceive a young bird in this bush!»  
 When they said, «Is it small?»  
 He replied, «Not at all!  
 It is four times as big as the bush!».  
 (Noakes 2002, p. 173)

To a certain extent, the recurrent creation of zoomorphic creatures – as well as of phytomorphic beings in nonsense botany – is ascribable to Lear's activity as a natural history draughtsman. As claimed by Colley, in both Lear's natural and nonsense animal portraiture, animals are often gifted with anthropomorphic individuality and thus released «from the objectifying and classifying gaze of the colonial collector» (Colley 2012-2013, p. 14). At the same time, the accretion of corporeal details and the insistence on physicality push Lear's picture-limericks well beyond the boundaries of natural illustration and nursery rhyme; here nonsense virtually borders on the grotesque, a 'low' genre that, according to Bakhtin, elicits fear of those same characteristics that induce laughter. In addition, while the illustrations certainly incite a harmonious relationship between the species, the 'alterity' inscribed in the human bodies inevitably lays bare Victorian preoccupations with the body's potential to regress to an animal state and to derangement. Through different aesthetic experiences, Lear's nonsense comes to address an informing motif of lowbrow nineteenth-century literature, considerably exploited by sensation authors like Collins and by Gothic fiction. As claimed by Wagner, «physical deformity features centrally in the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins who creates increasingly unusual forms of disability in the course of his novels» (Wagner 2010, p. 47). In a society that translated surface into moral knowledge, somatic oddity, according to the dictates of physiognomy and criminal anthropology, was read as a moral signifier. Incidentally, Lombroso himself maintained that

the criminal's nose was typically aquiline, «like the beak of a bird of prey» (Lombroso-Ferrero 1972, p. 15).

Being an 'index' of the mind, it was vital for the body to preserve its 'integrity' in order to avoid degeneration into madness and insanity. In its profusion of dismembered bodies, Lear's nonsense, therefore, also subverts one of the most sacred tenets of Victorian physiology. In the upside-down universe of nonsense, characters can easily lose their limbs as well as lives accidentally, as it happens to the old man of the Nile who cuts his thumbs while sharpening his nails with a file, or even deliberately, as both a person of Tartary («who divided his jugular artery») and the old man of New York («who murdered himself with a fork») do, in a sub-genre that Dilworth has called «suicide limerick» (Dilworth 1995, p. 535).

The most noticeable example of the 'destructive' drive ingrained in nonsense writing can be found in the second part of «Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos», which Lear expressly wrote at Wilkie Collins's suggestion (Noakes 2002, p. 535). Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos – whose name is a possible conflation of «discobolus», discus thrower, and «obol», a Greek coin – are the latest in Lear's long series of odd pairs, which include animate objects like 'the table and the chair' and unlikely animal partners, such as Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow, The Duck and the Kangaroo, and the celebrated Owl and the Pussycat. Part One shows the young Discobboloses climbing on the top of a wall «to watch the sunset sky/ And to hear the Nupiter Piffkin cry/ And the Biscuit Buffalo call» (p. 321). Their simple happiness in a nonsense land peopled by creatures with strange names is soon ruined by the thought of a possible fall. Hence they decide that perhaps «it is wiser far/ 'To remain for ever just where [they] are» (p. 321). The poem ends on the image of the contented couple contemplating the prospective advantages of their choice to fly «from worry of life»:

So Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos  
 Stood up and began to sing,  
 «Far away from hurry and strife  
 «Here we will pass the rest of life,  
 «Ding a dong, ding dong, ding!  
 «We want no knives nor forks nor chairs,  
 «No tables nor carpets nor household cares,  
 «From worry of life we've fled –  
 «Oh! W! X! Y! Z!  
 «There is no more trouble ahead,  
 «Sorrow or any such thing –  
 «For Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos!».  
 (p. 322)

Significantly, the existence from which the Discobboloses wish to «fly» is construed in negative, and almost Darwinian terms, like a blend of «hurry and strife» that hinders individual fulfilment. The numerous exclamations and the gibberish line enhance the couple's enthusiasm at the thought of escaping the strictures of social conventions by renouncing the comforts of (Victorian) domesticity emblemized in the inventory of «knives», «forks», «carpets» and «household cares».

Part Two finds them on the same wall after «twenty years, a month and a day», a little aged – «their hair had grown all pearly gray,/ And their teeth began to fall» (p. 430) – but apparently gratified, «by all admired, and by some respected» (p. 430). In the intervening years they have been blessed by the birth of twelve children, none of whom «has happened to fall» thanks to Mrs. Discobbolos's «maternal care!» (p. 430). Ironically enough, the Discobboloses have recreated on the narrow space of the wall the very picture of domestic incarceration they so much abhorred. Mrs. Discobbolos now longs for the social life they have renounced, encapsulated in the list of events – balls, garden parties, bazaars – their children cannot attend. Upon his wife's fatal question – «'Did it never come into your head/ 'That our lives must be lived elsewhere,/ 'Dearest Mr. Discobbolos?» (p. 430) – Mr. Discobbolos digs a trench, which he fills with «Dynamite gunpowder gench» (p. 431) and proceeds to detonate:

Pensively, Mr. Discobbolos  
 Sat with his back to the wall;  
 He lighted a match, and fired the train,  
 And the mortified mountain echoed again  
 To the sound of an awful fall!  
 And all the Discobbolos family flew  
 In thousands of bits to the sky so blue,  
 And no one was left to have said,  
 «Oh! W! X! Y! Z!  
 «Has it come into anyone's head  
 «That the end has happened to all  
 «Of the whole of the Clan Discobbolos?».  
 (p. 431)

However unexpected, the poem's brutal epilogue is in tune with a long tradition of children's literature as well as with the emerging genre of 'penny dreadfuls'. The verses resound with Learian coinings, nonsense words such as the memorable «runcible», and the rhythm of chants, alphabets – the self-referential «Oh! W! X! Y! Z!» –, and nursery rhymes, with the final stanza particularly reminiscent of the well-known figures of Humpty-Dumpty and Guy Fawkes. Such devices set the poem into a playful atmosphere that softens the severe attack on the cardinal values of

family ties and parental care that Lear's pendant poems yet impart. The force of the conflagration dismembers the whole of the Clan Discobolos that this time literally «fly» «in thousand of bits». It is surprising, in this respect, Lear's use of the term «Dynamite», since this high explosive had only recently been patented by Nobel and would rather feature in several works of fiction at the end of the century. The phrase «Dynamite gunpowder gench», moreover, provides a suitable instance of how Lear's nonsense is poised between referentiality – «Dynamite gunpowder» – and linguistic inventiveness – «gench», a typical Learian word-like non word. Nonsense 'sensation', in this regard, is primarily lexical: unknown, less-known or non-existent words are regularly used to create an effect of mild horror (cf. Kretschmer 1983, p. 240). This dynamics is almost commented upon in Lear's «The Land of the Blompopp Tree» (1882), a «Fantasy Story» set on the Moon. In describing the cryptic «Jizzdoddle Rocks», the narrator simply states that they «leave a profound impression of sensational surprise on the mind of the speckletator who first behold them» (Noakes 2002, p. 436), a passage which denotes Lear's consciousness of the Victorian engagement with spectacle and the power of sensation.

Given its subject matter, the second part of «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos» can be defined sensational. Undoubtedly Lear meant it as a humorous homage to Collins, an author that, with equal conviction, «reproduced cultural dynamics and described paradoxical situations that pose philosophical riddles» (Costantini 2008, p. 15). Indeed, scenes of violence, as we have seen, are not uncommon in Lear's nonsense writing, where very often rebellious and eccentric characters, like Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos, break all the rules of decorum and logic, before meeting a tragic end. The poem's conclusion is reminiscent of the extermination of the rival families in the Calabrian village of Pentedatilo that concluded the Gothic tale Lear had related in his *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria* (1852): «Finally, as if it were ordered that the actors in such a wholesale domestic tragedy were unfit to remain on earth, the castle of Pentedatilo [sic] fell by the shock of an earthquake, crushing together the Baron and Marchese, with the nurse, and every other agent in this Calabrian horror!» (Lear 1852, p. 198).

Notwithstanding their entertaining spirit, like sensation stories Lear's nonsense songs and tales appear to be tempered with an underlying fear for the unleashing of non-rational forces that can drive characters to the verge of insanity and death. The analogy between the two genres – equally interpreted as sites that are «outside of meaning» (Miller 1988, p. 147) –, is more thematic than aesthetic, though.

Whereas sensation fiction was deemed to appeal to the 'nerves', conjuring up «a corporeal, rather than a cerebral response in the reader» (Daly 2004, p. 40), nonsense verbal play and metanarrative intimations blunt its own 'sensational' content and imagery generating emotional de-

tachment. Unlike respectable mainstream fiction, popular genres of the nineteenth century – Gothic novels, ‘penny dreadfuls’, ‘shilly shockers’ and sensation novels – aimed to stimulate the reader’s excitement. In line with contemporary physiological studies such as Alexander Bain’s *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and George Henry Lewes’s *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859), sensation stories literally seized the reader’s body with ‘dangerous’ effects (cf. Garrison 2011, pp. 7-11). As Miller argues, this «genre offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenalin effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction, and so on» (Miller 1988, p. 146). Nonsense, on the contrary, even when it adopts the modes of ‘low’ literature seems to thwart the reader’s identification with the characters and events presented, thereby standing in inverted relation to sensation fiction. However, as Tigges claims, «lack of emotion is only the reverse of excess of emotion» (Tigges 2012-2013, p. 123). Admittedly, Levi defines Lear’s nonsense as «emotional parody»: «[his] songs, his comic lyrics, were parodies of the deepest emotions they expressed, but they were at least as sad as they were funny, and when they were in perfect balance, the emotion overcame the parody» (Levi 1991, p. 183).

Lear’s nonsense, in this perspective, prompts both cognitive and affective reflections, showing, once more, its intrinsic porous nature. Regardless of the cultural ‘status’ of the form he appropriated, Lear developed a poetical language that defies categorizations. As Soccio points out, «in Lear’s case, not only is genre reinvented according to the writer’s imagination, but it is redefined again and again so that the readers must be prepared to re-think their way of looking at traditional categories» (Soccio 2012-2013, p. 189). In its pervasive cross-fertilization of literary forms and themes, which operates within the text (the picture limericks), between the texts (that are parodied), and (considering Lear’s enthusiasm for inter-semiotic transposition) between artistic languages, Lear’s nonsense ultimately elicits an aesthetic response that, in Kantian terms, is reflective and sensual, pure and impure, rational and sensational, at the same time. This undecidability and dialectical force disclose the Victorian renegotiation of cultural canons and traditional literary modes that were collapsing under the weight of changing market conditions and new relativistic theories.

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## Hopkins's Poetic Porcupines and the Aesthetic of Taste

Jude V. Nixon

(Salem State University, USA)

**Abstract** Using Friedrich Schlegel's conceptualisation of the fragment as something beautiful in its own isolated and incomplete yet integral form, «Poetic Porcupines and the Aesthetic of Taste» examines the unfinished Hopkins poem as something finished and bearing its own attendant beauty. A prevailing fragmentary impulse is evident in Hopkins's poetry as well as in his prose texts. Even his life might be characterized as fragment, defined by incompleteness, injury, waste, wreck, and ruin. The Hopkins unfinished poem should be read in light of seminal aesthetic notions of perfection in which aesthetic closure satisfies even as it preserves continuance. Kant's concept of the end and of perfection also comments informatively on Hopkins's poetic oeuvre as well as on his personal and priestly life. Hopkins's fragments are poetic porcupines, miniature works of art severed and isolated from the larger whole, but entirely self-contained and unfinished in their completion.

**Keywords** Closure. Fragment. Gerard Manley Hopkins. Taste.

The Hopkins unfinished poem is a much understudied subject. Scholars loosely classify it as poems he himself refers to as fragments, or poems he presumably did not complete because of the absence of fair copies. At other times, poems by their very typographical signatures (ellipses, asterisks, dashes, unfinished thoughts) are considered fragments, and, in the case of «St. Thecla», poems that do not tell the complete story. Critics of the Hopkins poetic fragment ignore the fact that «each fragment», in the words of Naomi Schor, is «a microcosm of and acceptable aesthetic substitute for the whole», a «disintegration of the textual whole, the increasing autonomy of the parts, and in the end a generalized synecdoche» (Schor 1987, pp. 28, 43). In Friedrich Schlegel's conceptualisation, fragments are «not against systems», but are «a brilliant substitute» that «can and do bring the entire noisy federation of literary and philosophical quarrels under one roof» (Firchow 1971, p. 18).<sup>1</sup> Put in the context of the aesthetically impure, Hopkins's fragments, deliberately or accidentally unfinished, are

1 In *Critical Fragments*, Schlegel writes, «There is so much poetry and yet there is nothing more rare than a poem! This is due to the vast quantity of poetical sketches, studies, fragments, tendencies, ruins, and raw material» (Firchow 1971, p. 143).

often viewed as formalistically flawed, flaunting an im-pure taste in their embrace of «the pathos of the unfinished» and «the inadequacy of words» (Harries 1994, p. 47).<sup>2</sup> To James Vigus, the fragment as a form rejects «the totalising impulse of a systematic architectonic» and embodies «a strong form of resistance to prevailing norms» (Vigus 2011, pp. 2-3). «Fragmentation, by definition, resists totalisation» (Regier 2010, p. 5).

Using the seminal writings on incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin,<sup>3</sup> along with Hopkins's poem «St. Thecla» as a case study, this article argues that the critical failure to appreciate the formalistic and formulaic complexities of Hopkins's aesthetics has led to a sense of his fragments as crude or vulgar, and lacking a universally sanctioned aesthetic of taste.<sup>4</sup> Central as the fragment is to Hopkins's poetry, poetics, life, and vocation, its canonical demystification, I argue, has contributed to the general neglect of its «appendant beauty», described by Kant as «a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 488). This aesthetic slighting, this failure to observe in Hopkins a certain aesthetic norm (common sense), not merely a Kantean «taste of sense» (private pleasure) but a «taste of reflection» (public validity), overlooks the myriad ways the fragment comments informatively on Hopkins's poetic oeuvre as well as on his personal and priestly life. The need to rethink the role of the unfinished in Hopkins finds validation from reading his poetic fragments in light of seminal aesthetic notions of «perfection», especially considering the fact that the unfinished is often conceived as a type of impure aesthetics. Making an important distinction between incomplete and unfinished poems, Balachandra Rajan, in *The Form of the Unfinished*, considers «incomplete» «poems which ought to be completed», and «unfinished» «poems which ask not to be finished, which carry within themselves the reasons for arresting or effacing themselves as they do. If an unfinished poem were to be finished it would ideally erase its own significance» (Rajan 1985, p. 14). As E.F. Carritt observes, «perfection» is «obscurely apprehended» as «beautiful» by the «unsophisticated mind», which also confuses «beauty with goodness»; for «Many things which, though organic, do not satisfy a concept

2 To Schiller, for example, the beautiful is formalistically pleasing. He writes in Letter XVIII, «By beauty the sensuous man is led to form and to thought; by beauty the spiritual man is brought back to matter and restored to the world of sense» (Schiller 1899?, p. 85).

3 Kant's «Analytic of the Beautiful», I.A. Richards's «How Does a Poem Know When It Is Finished?», Marjorie Levinson's *The Romantic Fragment Poem*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure*, Alison Pearce's «'Magnificent Mutilations': John Keats and the Romantic Fragment», Thomas McFarland's *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, Elizabeth Wanning Harries's *The Unfinished Manner*, and Balachandra Rajan's *The Form of the Unfinished*.

4 According to Schiller, «The beautiful is not only pleasing to the individual but to the whole species» (Schiller 1899?, p. 263).

of perfection are beautiful» (Carritt 1962, pp. 4, 77). To cite Kant again, «Beauty, therefore, as a formal subjective finality, involves no thought whatsoever of a perfection of the object». For, «strictly speaking, perfection neither gains by beauty, nor beauty by perfection» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, pp. 487-488). The «judgement of taste», according to Kant, is «independent of the concept of perfection»; and «The judgement of Taste which declares an object beautiful with reference to a definite conception is not pure» (Carritt 1966, pp. 115-116).

As unfinished, the fragment exemplifies not only incompleteness but impurity, given the fact that as a hybrid or miscegenized literary type it represents «impossible purities». <sup>5</sup> In the «Analytic of the Beautiful», Kant views the judgment of taste as «aesthetical» and «subjective», not «scientific», not one of «cognition», and definitely not «logical». <sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he adds: «In order to decide whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the Understanding to the Object for cognition but, by the Imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the Understanding) to the subject, and», anticipating Freud, «its feeling of pleasure or pain» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 476). In other words, we use the imagination and not cognition to discern the beautiful. <sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton finds that «When the Kantian subject of taste encounters an object of beauty, it discovers in it a unity and harmony» reflective of «the free play of its own faculties» (Eagleton 1990, p. 87). Taste, therefore, is aesthetic, and determined subjectively, albeit universally, and perhaps with the aid of the understanding. Schiller agrees, calling taste «the faculty for apprehending the beautiful» which «holds at once the spiritual elements and that of the sense». It is taste that can «ennoble the perceptions of the senses so as to make ideas of them» (Schiller 1899?, p. 185). Reflecting on Kant in *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, Hugh Grady finds discussion of the aesthetic as «invariably a discourse about beauty and unity», which Grady sees as a «narrow conception» of the term, «a radical separation from reality that denies rather than challenges existing reality» (Grady 2009, pp. 2-3). He rightly concludes that aesthetics addresses «the ugly as well as the beautiful» (p. 3). <sup>8</sup> E.F. Carritt agrees on this idea of the aesthetic: «To be tormented

5 Brody (1998) is writing here not about the fragment per se but about hybridity and racial mixing in Victorian culture.

6 Carritt agrees with Kant, writing, «the experience of beauty is not a logical judgement nor a perception of fact» (Carritt 1962, p. 8).

7 Schiller concurs: «the aesthetic judgment depends on the imagination» (Schiller 1899?, p. 258).

8 In his essay, «Detached Reflections on Different Questions of Aesthetics», Schiller writes, «the same object can be ugly, defective, even to be morally rejected, and nevertheless be agreeable and pleasing to the senses; that an object can revolt the senses, and yet be good» (Schiller 1899?, pp. 263-264).

with a passion for beauty, a sensitiveness to ugliness, is the condition of the aesthetic experience» (Carritt 1962, p. 48). Grady looks to Theodor Adorno, a Frankfurt School critic of enlightenment ideals, for support of his idea that aesthetics engages the elegant and the inelegant: «The definition of aesthetics as the theory of the beautiful is so unfruitful because the formal character of the concept of beauty is inadequate to the full content [...] of the aesthetic. If aesthetics were nothing but a systematic catalogue of whatever is called beautiful, it would give no idea of the life that transpires in the concept of beauty» (Grady 2009, p. 3).<sup>9</sup>

Led by Kant to consider the autonomy of the beautiful in such concepts as the good, the perfect, the pleasant, and the agreeable, Friedrich Schiller assumes a different stance on the beautiful. He moves Kant's subjectivist aesthetics further by assigning it a moral value and situating it outside the realm of the subjective. In Schiller's conceptualisation of a moral aesthetic, the Hopkins poetic fragment, like «St. Thecla», would still retain its beauty even as it asserts the moral. Schiller, like Hopkins, and unlike Kant, sees the beautiful as one with the moral. As such, art to Schiller possesses an «educative power», contains «the cure of souls», and is the «great healer of our cultural ills» (Schiller 1899?, pp. xxviii, xxxi, lii). Schiller separates beauty into any number of categories: ideal («the beau-ideal», «eternally one and indivisible»); experimental («eternally double»); energetic («sav- age violence and harshness»); and graceful (assuming at times the form of «effeminacy and weakness»), the latter of which «relax[es] the mind in the moral sphere as well as the physical» (pp. 81-82). The poeticising of this idea in Hopkins finds expression in poems such as «To what serves Mortal Beauty», where beauty, albeit «dangerous», «keeps warm / Men's wit to things that are; | to what good means». «God's better beauty», the poem concludes, is «grace». In a 13 October 1886 letter to Bridges, Hopkins elaborates on this idea of art and the usefulness: «What are works of art for? To educate, to be standard. Education is meant for the many, standards are for public use. To produce then is of little use unless what we produce is known» (Thornton, Phillips 2013, vol. 2, p. 813). He would go on to assert a nationalistic function to art, that works of art are a great power

9 For Grady, Kant's aesthetic theory was «an attempt to conceptualize the specific states of mind associated with the beautiful and the sublime in Enlightenment culture» (Grady 2009, p. 8). Following Kant, Grady ties the rise of the aesthetic to mercantile capitalism and commodity culture, «a new kind of religion for a decentered, secular world» (2009, p. 21). He sees impure aesthetics as «primarily a product of 'Western Marxism'» (p. 22). Eagleton, similarly, talks about the aesthetic as a bourgeois enterprise (Eagleton 1990, p. 8). For him, the aesthetic was «one answer to this vexed question of how values are to be derived, in a condition where neither civil society nor the political state would seem to provide such values with a particularly plausible foundation». The birth of aesthetics was «an intellectual discourse» that «coincides with the period when cultural production is beginning to suffer the miseries and indignities of commodification» (pp. 63-64).



in the world and a strength to the empire, not unlike Blake, for whom art is the true embodiment of nation. In his *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, Schiller describes the beautiful as «an obligation of phenomena», in which the senses render judgment before the understanding takes over (Schiller 1899?, p. 188). «Beauty results from the harmony between spirit and sense» to which man brings «an open sense, a broad heart, a spirit of freshness» (p. 336). Schiller sees beauty as «the sphere of unfettered contemplation and reflection; beauty conducts us into the world of ideas, without however taking us from the world of sense»; the «aesthetic disposition of the soul [...] gives birth to liberty» (pp. 111, 113).

The theory of the fragment owes much to Friedrich Schlegel's conceptualisation of it, seeing it as beautiful in its own isolated and incomplete yet integral form. Schlegel writes in his *Athenaeum Fragment*, «Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written» (Firchow 1971, p. 164). According to him, «A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine» (p. 189). This sense of the fragment speaks well not only to Hopkins's «St. Thecla» but to any number of his other fragments, such as «I am like a slip of comet». While the poem might well be part of the larger «Florin in Italy», as a type of the Schlegel fragment, as I will later show, it asserts its own coherence, legitimacy, authenticity, independence, completeness. In Fragment 116 of the *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798), Schlegel calls the fragment «the only kind of poetry that is more than a kind» (p. 16).<sup>10</sup> He believes that the fragment – and this is especially relevant to Hopkins – is the most appropriate form to capture «the entire spirit of an author». As he would write regarding the organic nature of the Romantic fragment, «The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that is should forever be becoming and never be finished» (p. 175).

Hopkins saw Schlegel as a competent critic of poetry and was quite likely influenced by his conceptualisation of the fragment as a legitimate art form. The influence also comes from Keats and Parmenides, especially the latter's celebrated *Fragments*. Yet, there remains no governing principle on the Hopkins fragment, given the way his poetry has been categorized historically and canonically. Here is what we know: one, that there are a number of unfinished poems in Hopkins, abandoned because they lost «the one rapture of an inspiration», their «blowpipe flame» quickly «quenched»

<sup>10</sup> As Peter Firchow observes, «one of Schlegel's own definitions for his fragments was 'condensed essays and reviews', and certainly a large number of the fragments are just that» (Firchow 1971, p. 16). In the language of Jonathan Arac, the fragment is «the genre that transcends genre because it is both 'progressive' and 'universal', thus going beyond fixity and limitation» (Arac 2011, p.20).

(«To R.B.»); secondly, poems are unfinished because Hopkins either did not have time or took the time to complete them – as such, they have multiple variants, no fair copies, and appear altogether messy, unfinished; lastly, poems he refers to as fragments are, in fact, finished in the sense that he intended them to be of a supposedly unfinished character. In other words, in presenting the fragment in an «unfinished manner», as Harries observes, «writers – novelists, philosophers, poets, essayists – insisted on presenting their finished texts as fragmentary» (Harries 1994, p. 1). Fragmentation asks these important questions: «How do we fill gaps? Why do we want to fill them? What is the nature of fracture and fragmentation, in contrast to wholeness and plenitude, and our fascination with them?» (Regier 2010, p. 1).

The fragmentary landscape concerns «issues of terminology, issues of periodization, issues of intentionality or agency», or «rhetorical clues embedded in them [fragments] and in their particular material (prefaces, glosses, afterwords, subtitles and the like)» (Harries 1994, pp. 3-4). Harries raises a series of critical questions about the aesthetic character of the fragment: «What does it mean to ‘finish’ a work? What is the process by which literary texts ‘evolve’ into ‘unfinished’ works? How is it that people came to see some fragments as ‘finishable’? What kinds of literary judgment are implied in this distinction?» (p. 3). Kant uses the same language, «internal finality», to talk about «perfection», which he sees as the «essential character of beauty». In any critique of taste, he writes, it is of «utmost importance to decide whether this beauty is really reducible to the concept of perfection». In order to «represent an objective finality in a thing, we must first have a concept of *what sort of a thing it is to be*» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 487).

The idea of a poem fulfilling its goal by realising its own sense of completion, its own beauty, is the subject of I.A. Richards’s groundbreaking essay, «How Does a Poem Know When It is Finished?». Although he does not make completion coeval to perfection and the beautiful, Richards asks some of these same questions, insisting, for example, that «the minimal problem a poem can set itself is the mere finding or creation (discovery or invention) of a situation which will permit its growth»: «How does a poem grow? How does it learn how to become itself? How does it know when it is finished?» (Richards 1963, pp. 164-165). Richards’s organic metaphors conceptualize the poem as something embryonic and physiologic, something about the poem’s DNA that is not parthenogenic: it does not birth itself, but has a beginning and an end.<sup>11</sup> Addressing the aporetic nature of the fragment, he finds that «language works not only by and through

11 «Nothing finite can exist of itself», Hopkins writes. «In anything finite it cannot be self-bestowed; nothing finite can determine what itself shall, in a world of being, be» (Devlin 1967, pp. 124-125). In Hopkins’s «To R.B.», for example, a poem’s coming to be is organic, even orgasmic: «the blowpipe flame, | Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came».

the words used but through words not used [...]. There is endless opposition and collaboration among words that do not appear at all: shaping, modifying, directing the activity of the growing poem at all points, guiding it and helping it to find out what has to be, and warning it when, if ever, it has become itself» (p. 167). Richards's caution must take into account any consideration of Hopkins's called and so-called fragments, including even a finished poem as «St. Thecla», which decidedly does not retell the entire hagiographical account from which it is derived: «Even when the poem *uses* verbal material, which is reported as having occurred in some biographically important incident, we would be rash to assume too confidently that the incident in any deep way determined the poem. [...] The poem may just be using for its own purposes something that, in life, belonged in a different web». Thus, «The completion of a poem may be no matter of addition or excision» (pp. 168, 174).

Classification of fragments, understandably, concerns itself with ideas and ideals of closure, with how poems end, whether they end, whether there is some sense of formal closure, whether readers leave the experience feeling relatively satisfied, and whether agreeableness or enjoyment not only pleases but gratifies. In her seminal study, *Poetic Closure*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith believes that «personal and literary history» never entirely accounts for a poem's «particular existence and form», and that, consonant with Richards, «certain intraverbal relations have a great deal more to do with the structure and integrity of the poem» (Smith 1968, p. 97). Smith's real concern is a poem's ontology (existence, formation, character, integrity, and wholeness), and in particular its sense of an ending, along with the satisfaction or taste the poem leaves on readers. The «sense of conclusiveness in the last lines of a poem», she writes, «seems to confirm retrospectively, as if with a final stamp of approval, the valued qualities of the entire experience we have just sustained» (p. 4). It is this very desire «*to preserve a continuance*» that can be said «to denote in a general way what is called pleasure» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 484).<sup>12</sup> Formal closure, then, occurs when the intellectual and emotional satisfaction at the end of a poem makes us feel that the poem ends, that it concludes, providing as it were a circularity, a roundedness to the poem and to the reading ex-

Here the poem's gestation is not unlike the partum period of a fetus: «Nine months [...] she long | Within her wears, bears and moulds the same» (Phillips 1986, p. 184).

**12** Closure, as Smith sees it, means being «satisfied by the failure of continuation», the «expectation of nothing» (Smith 1968, p. 34): «Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art; and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design» (p. 36).

perience. This, says Kant, is the height of the aesthetic experience, «for the very reason that its determining ground cannot be a concept, but is rather the feeling (of the internal sense) of the concert in the play of the mental powers as a thing only capable of being felt» (p. 487). Smith's sense of closure, along with Kant's, comports well with Hopkins's fragmentary practice and sense of the aesthetics in which closure satisfies even as it keeps the poem open, preserving its continuance.

Hopkins was obsessed with endings, perhaps because much of his life was defined by so little personal and professional closure. His intriguing poem, «Peace», written on the eve of his departure from Oxford for Leigh, raises questions about the state of continuance, a place of rest: «Your round me roaming end». Hopkins's priestly reassignments were so abrupt that the poet in him longed for some «lovely ease in change of place» («The earth and heaven, so little known»). His life might well be characterized as fragment, defined as it was by incompleteness, injury, waste, wreck, and ruin, at least «superficially like the fragments and failures of a life» (Thornton, Phillips 2013, vol. 1, p. xli). Even the life of Christ was made to mirror Hopkins's own incompleteness, «cut short [...] and doomed to succeed by failure; his plans were baffled, his hopes dashed, and his work was done by being broken off undone» (vol. 2, p. 795). Hopkins admitted as much in a 24 April-17 May 1885 letter to Alexander Baillie: «Some time since, I began to overhaul my old letters, accumulations of actually ever since ~~seho~~ I was at school, destroying all but a very few, ~~but~~ ^and^ growing ever loather to destroy [...]; and there they lie and my old notebooks and beginnings of things, ever so many, which it seems to me might well have been done, ~~Old~~ [heavy deletion illegible] ruins and wrecks» (vol. 2, p. 730). He wrote to Bridges on 7 August 1868 concerning his poetic ruins: «I cannot send my s Summa for it is burnt with my other verses: I saw they wd. interfere with my state and vocation» (vol. 1, p. 186). And in a 29 October to 2 November 1881 letter to Richard Watson (Canon) Dixon, he would go on to describe the creative process and how it applies to him. The high expectations of Hopkins's vocation meant that things seemingly unrelated to his ministry would assume less priority and urgency; many projects, then, once begun would remain unfinished, incomplete. Fragments also convey to us the nature of Hopkins's compositional and creative process, where seemingly incomplete poems are complete, meaning finished as time and the occasion would allow, the absence of fair copies illustrating just this dilemma:

[...] I shall, in my present mind, continue to compose, as occasion shall fairly allow, which I am afraid will be seldom and indeed for some years past have^s^ been scarcely ever, and let what I produce wait and take its chance; for a very spiritual man once told me that with things like composition it the best sacrifice was not to destroy one's work but to

leave it entirely to be disposed of by obedience. But I can scarcely fancy myself asking a superior to publish ^a volume of^ my verses and I own that humanly there is very little likelihood of that ever coming to pass. (vol. 1, p. 493)<sup>13</sup>

Thomas McFarland's description of Wordsworth's corpus as «disparactive» (McFarland 1981, p. 6), with its triad of incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin, applies to Hopkins. A prevailing fragmentary impulse is evident in his poetry as well as in his prose texts, such as letters, diary, journal, sermons, and religious writings. MacKenzie correctly captures the Hopkins practice as one of «false beginnings and much re-working of material» (Gardner, MacKenzie 1967, p. lii), concluding, «Hopkins often does not appear to have made final copies of his poems» (p. lvi). He points to Hopkins's 29 April 1889 admission to Bridges: «we greatly differ in feeling about copying one's verses out: I find it repulsive, and let them lie months and years in rough copy untransferred to my book. Still I hope soon to send you my accumulation». MacKenzie praises Humphry House's handling of Hopkins's poetic remains, especially the fragments, which MacKenzie relegates to the status of the unelegant, the unaesthetic, the tasteless: «The poems could not have been appreciated in their disarray, and House's fine contribution to the canon of Hopkins's verse was to rearrange the incompleting fragments into some artistic order» (p. lvi). He also draws attention to House's enlarged edition of *Note-books, the Journals and Papers* (1959), where «a number of new fragments of verse were carefully reproduced» (p. lvi). Still, Hopkins's fragments, in MacKenzie's view, remain flawed poems and aesthetically displeasing. His marginalisation of them in edition after edition of Hopkins's poems is evidence enough of his view of them as incomplete if imperfect.

Hopkins struggled to complete projects, either because of the lack of inspiration (his muse turning «sullen»), or the demands of his religious vocation. He never knew when and where he would be assigned; and even when dispatched to one place ended up, not infrequently, in another – gingerbread permanence is how he unenthusiastically called it; his other metaphor was the proverbial football pumped up and waiting another kick of the boot. «And in this life I lead now, which is one of a continually jaded and harassed mind», he writes to Bridges on 1-8 September 1885, «if in any leisure I try to do anything I make no way: – nor with my work» (Thornton, Phillips 2013, vol. 2, p. 743). Examining Hopkins's oeuvre, then, through the «disparactive», a severance as well as a rupture and a reassembling,

<sup>13</sup> In his 4-14 November 1881 response, Dixon declares, «Surely one vocation cannot destroy another: and such a Society as yours will not remain ignorant that you have such gifts as have seldom been given by God to man» (Thornton, Phillips 2013, vol. 1, p. 496).

is a unique if useful way of conceiving his life as well as his poetics.<sup>14</sup> In the new *Correspondence*, R.K.R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips describe his «brilliant but unfinished literary projects, [...] archaeological remnants from which we can begin to imagine the structures which he dreamed» (vol. 1, p. lxi). It would take a separate study to investigate the many things Hopkins contemplated or begun which never saw the light of day, whether music, Greek meters, studies of Aristophanes and Homer, a critical edition of St. Patrick's *Confession*, an ode on the Valley of the Clywd, or a treatment of Greek Negatives: «I am now writing a quasi-philosophical paper on Greek Negatives: but when shall I finish it? or if finished will it pass the censors? or if it does will ^the Classical Review or^ any magazine take it?» (vol. 2, p. 914). There are any number of scientific treatises Hopkins never completed, such as a non-technical study of light and the ether. «I can scarcely believe that on that [writing on meter] or on anything else anything of mine will ever see the light – of publicity nor even of day» (vol. 2, p. 744). In Kantian language, this inability to realise completion is where «the subject feels itself quite at home in its effort to grasp form in the imagination, but no perfection of any object» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 487). Ironically, Hopkins's poetry might well be the only place where he experienced an ideal of closure seldom found in the personal and professional.

There are not many fair copies of anything in Hopkins, who seems to have adopted the view that his writings are organic, a work in continual progress. His 17-29 May 1885 admission to Bridges that «we compose fragmentarily» (Thornton, Phillips 2013, vol. 2, p. 736) extends to his poetry, causing editors, biographers, and critics to routinely but mistakenly employ the term «fragment» to describe many of Hopkins's poems, including completed ones like «St. Thecla». The critical impulse has been what Simon Humphries has described as a «dismissive approach to what Hopkins achieves in [his] drafts» (Humphries 2009, p. 30). In other words, critics have failed to appreciate the beautiful because, wanting Hopkins's poems to satisfy a certain desire, charm, or emotion, they have been unable to approach his oeuvre with a certain measure of disinterest.<sup>15</sup> In a 17-29 May 1885 letter to Bridges defending himself against the charge of writing «fragments of a dramatic poem» in the composition of «St. Winefred's Well», Hopkins observes that artists compose «fragmentarily». The letter contends that fragments can in fact be finished or completed poems: «To

14 The «multifacetedness and intricacy» of fragmentation «enable conceptual and textual analysis of texts not normally thought of in relation to brokenness» (Regier 2010, p. 25).

15 «Taste ['the one and only disinterested and *free* delight'] is the faculty of estimating an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The objective of such a delight is called the beautiful» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 479). Kant again writes, «the satisfaction of taste in the beautiful is the only one that is disinterested and free» (qtd. in Carritt 1966, p. 111).



me a finished completed fragment, above all of a play, is the same unreality as a prepared impromptu. No, but we compose fragmentarily and what I had here and there done I finished up and sent as samples to see if I cd. be encouraged to go on» (Thornton, Phillips 2013, vol. 2, p. 736). Hopkins elaborates further on the aesthetically imperfect in a 1-2 April 1885 letter to Bridges on Chopin's fragments, something he had thought long and hard about and considered complete in their incompleteness: «When I hear one of Chopin's fragmentary airs struggling and tossing on a surf of harmonies ^accompaniment^ what does it matter whether one or even half a dozen notes are left out of it;? its being and meaning lies outside itself in the harmonies; they give give the tonality, modality, feeling and all. But I could write reams on the matter, which time does not allow» (vol. 2, p. 722).<sup>16</sup> This is the Kantian beautiful: «*that which, apart from concept, is represented as the Object of a UNIVERSAL delight*» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 479). To Kant, aesthetic taste does not depend on individual or private interest but on public approval, what he sometimes calls «subjective universality» (Carritt 1966, p. 112).

Our critical disparagement of fragments is built on the assumption that, possessing some crude or untrained taste, they reveal little or nothing. Rather, fragments disclose a considerable amount about themselves and the larger corpus from which they have become detached, severed, cut off, mutilated. These small suns possess relevant data, shedding light on their own origin, history, and evolution as well as on those of their stellar companions. Take, for example, «I am like a slip of comet», a poem in which a comet, like the poem, breaks off from a larger mass. Formerly an autobiographical fragment severed from the greater «*Floris in Italy*», «I am like as slip of comet» presumes to discuss the inconspicuous or negligible status of the poetic persona, a theme consistent with Hopkins's artistic self in seclusion, as in «*God's Grandeur*» and the voyeuristic «*Epithalamion*». Like comets, often invisible to the naked eye, the speaker sees himself «Scarce worth discovery, in some corner seen / Bridging the slender difference of two stars». Whether the comet comes «out of space, or suddenly engender'd» by combined elements of ice, frozen gases, and small meteoric dust, it remains enigmatic: «no man knows». Temporarily suspending the comparison, the speaker focuses exclusively on the comet's numerous metamorphoses. As the comet moves from its aphelion

16 Hopkins is using «impromptu» to mean improvised or extemporized music, made up on the spot at the whim of the player. Chopin, as well as Schubert, wrote down their «impromptus», and pianists learn them, «prepare» them, and by so doing carry out the contradiction/unreality of a prepared improvisation. This, Hopkins suggests, is parallel to setting out to write a fragment of a play, i.e. with no intention of writing a complete play – what is a play that is only fragmentary? It's not a play, which by definition, is a complete work. I owe this to Catherine Phillips.



to its perihelion position, its tail grows under evaporation by solar heat. Poetically presented, when the comet, now a coquette, «sights the sun she grows and sizes / And spins her skirts out». The nucleus through evaporation loses some of its central condensation, and light from the sun is reflected in those separated dust particles that resemble, we are told, dim searchlights: «her central star», the poet writes,

Shakes its cocooning mists; and so she comes  
To fields of light; millions of travelling rays  
Pierce her; she hangs upon the flame-cased sun,  
And sucks the light as full as Gideon's fleece.  
(Phillips 1986, p. 40)

No longer able to maintain her shape («her tether calls her»), the comet gradually loses her tail; as light dissipates she «shreds her smock of gold» between her other planetary sisters. Intense solar heat eventually evaporates all that remains of the comet, an event compared to the sun's effect on Gideon's drenched fleece: «And then goes out into the cavernous dark». The comet's many transformations now fully accounted for, the speaker locates some personal parallels, although the gender is now switched. Not only is he as inconspicuous as a comet, but he also has an energetic attraction to the «contagious sun», eventually to see his own light consumed by that very life source. The sun/Son analogy is now much in play in Hopkins's energy physics. That final movement or law, a «not ungentle death», is not, however, a cessation of life. Rather, it is the death that is the peak of sexual ecstasy. As the comet collides and is consumed by the sun, returning to the life source from which it originated, so the speaker sees himself tending. His own consummation and reconstitution is equally dramatic and certain.

The theme of «I am like a slip of comet» is cosmic copulation (Michel Serres's term), an incestuous romance between the sun and a comet. The fragment addresses courtship, foreplay, penetration, consummation, death, and, ultimately, renewal. Drawing heat from the sun's rays is a process not unlike what occurs in «God's Grandeur». God's heat ensures a continuation of the world's energy supply because of the re-creative act of the Holy Ghost. In the fragment, the sun and comet are subtly engaged in a joint procreative and secretive act, their «little sweet». As female, the virginal comet possesses a «slip» and «smock», lifts her «skirts» to the penetrative rays of the sun, «draw[s] » and «sucks» his heat, is «Pierce[d]» by his light, and is summarily deflowered: «shreds her smock of gold». Not a poem on entropy - on decline, disorder, irreversibility - «A slip of comet» is Hopkins's attempt to illustrate collision and absorption in the cohabitive relationship between the sun and other stellar bodies. The Hopkins poem fragment shows that «more direct attention should be paid to

the fragment as a literary form of special importance». But while the fragment «can be viewed as that form which more completely than any other embodies romantic ideals and aims», as an «infinite or unending poem», it is «not attractive» (Rauber 1969, pp. 212, 214). Still, as Kant points out in his subjectivist aesthetic, «There can, therefore, be no rule according to which any one is to be compelled to recognize anything as beautiful» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 482).

Is the Hopkins poem fragment, then, based on the following assumptions about completion and aesthetic taste? (1) the poem was left incomplete because the poet was not through working on it, wanted to, but could find neither the time nor the inspiration, the autograph copies and variants bearing all of the conventional signs of its unconsummated end; (2) the poet did not bring to a close in the poem the closure present in the originating narrative; in other words, poetic closure does not mirror narrative closure, does not tell the complete and full account; (3) the poet deliberately chose to end the poem the way he did, leaving it seemingly incomplete, as is the case in the genre of such Romantic fragments as Coleridge's «Kubla Khan», Byron's «Don Juan», and Keats's «Hyperion» poems. Fragments in this latter categorization are not «accidental, or the result of some disproportion between idea and execution», but fundamental to writers' «conception of their texts» (Harries 1994, p. 2). Considering the above listed typologies, we see that there are three possible generic forms of the Hopkins fragment: (1) a poetic thought, gesture, or idea never fully developed or advanced; (2) a poem left unfinished because Hopkins wanted to complete it but ran out of time or inspiration, leaving no discernible fair copy; and (3) a finished poem that has a seemingly unfinished quality or feel to it (the so-called Romantic fragment) but where the poet clearly felt satisfied with the result; or, in the isolated case of «I am like a slip of comet», a finished or displaced fragment, a textual fracture, severed from a larger and still extant whole. Some Hopkins critics would perhaps add another: a poem where the poet does not tell the entire original story but truncates the account. Commenting on «St. Thecla», for example, Norman MacKenzie writes: «The leisurely pace of Hopkins's heroic couplets [...] had not even reached her conversion after thirty-four lines» (MacKenzie 1981, p. 220). As a poem that corresponds to both the third and fourth types of fragment, and illustrating an entirely moral aesthetic on spiritual and physical beauty, «St. Thecla» reveals an intentionality in its structure that illuminates Hopkins's reworking of the fragment form:

*St. Thecla*

That his fast-flowing hours with sandy silt  
Should choke sweet virtue's glory is Time's great guilt.  
Who thinks of Thecla? Yet her name was known,

Time was, next whitest after Mary's own.  
 To that first golden age of Gospel times  
 And bright Iconium eastwards reach my rhymes.  
 Near by is Paul's free Tarsus, fabled where  
 Spent Pegasus down the stark-precipitous air  
 Flung rider and wings away; though these were none,  
 And Paul is Tarsus' true Bellerophon.  
 They are neighbours; but (what nearness could not do)  
 Christ's only charity charmed and chained these two.  
 She, high at the housetop sitting, as they say,  
 Young Thecla, scanned the dazzling streets one day;  
 Twice lovely, tinted eastern, turnèd Greek —  
 Crisp lips, straight nose, and tender-slanted cheek.  
 Her weeds all mark her maiden, though to wed,  
 Withal her mien is modest, ways are wise,  
 And grave past girlhood earnest in her eyes.  
 Firm accents strike her fine and scrollèd ear,  
 A man's voice and a new voice speaking near.  
 The words came from a court across the way.  
 She looked, she listened: Paul taught long that day.  
 He spoke of God the Father and His Son,  
 Of world made, marred, and mended, lost and won;  
 Of virtue and vice; but most (it seemed his sense)  
 He praised the lovely lot of continence:  
 All over, some such words as these, though dark,  
*The world was saved by virgins*, made the mark.  
 He taught another time there and a third.  
 The earnest-hearted maiden sat and heard,  
 And called to come at mealtime she would not:  
 They rose at last and forced her from the spot.  
 (Phillips 1986, pp. 59-60)

Instancing the evanescence of time and how quickly memory and the historical record succumb to it, «St. Thecla» tells of the eponymous heroine's encounter with Paul, one so profound that it redirects her passions and priorities. She is held spell-bound by this new and strange accent and voice, Paul's «virginal tongue» («The Wreck of the Deutschland»), refusing to eat all day and had to be forcible moved. Hopkins's rhymes reach back spatio-temporally to Thecla's eastern home in Iconium, and to «that first golden age of Gospel times», to momentarily reclaim Thecla's legendary

reputation, beauty, and virtue.<sup>17</sup> Hopkins compares Thecla's erasure to the ravages of time on ancient ruins, the way the sands of time «choke sweet virtue's glory». His account covers roughly the first ten verses of the longer forty-five verse apocryphal version with its extended coda. It includes Thecla's association to Mary as a young, pure, and betrothed virgin; the early church as an iconic figure; Paul's specialness; the historical links between Paul and Thecla; Thecla's beauty matched only by her modesty; Paul's sermons on chastity; and Thecla's response to them and her resolve. The account is void of all drama, such as Thecla's two trials, her miraculous rescues, and baptism by fire and water; Paul's imprisonment; Thecla's haircutting and cross-dressing; her itinerant ministry, movements, and pursuit of Paul; and the combative exchanges between Paul and Thecla. It adds the mythology of Pegasus and Tarsus. «St. Thecla» is a truncated poem if by that is meant only that the poem is a short version of a longer story. It manipulates form to achieve the kind of aesthetic taste Levinson describes as «sensible unfinishedness» (Levinson 1986, p. 130).

The poem's four-part structure is unevenly divided: Part I (lines 1-12) covers Thecla's fading glory due to the ravages of time; Part II (lines 13-20) describes Thecla's celebrated beauty inextricably connected to her virtue; Part III (lines 21-30) comments on Paul's sermon reaching a reclining Thecla; and Part IV (lines 31-34) picks up Paul's second and third sermon on chastity and Thecla's resolve. Written in heroic rhyming (masculine) couplets, perhaps to re-inscribe, to fix, Thecla's transgressive person and personality, «St. Thecla» opens with an apostrophe to personified Time, whose hourglass effects, its «great guilt», threatens because it temporizes «virtue's glory». Time's culpability, the poem maintains through its use of prosopopœia, is how quickly it erases the glory of virtue. The poem's aestheticism also comes from the attendant beauty of easily the most dominant figurative element in the poem, its rich alliterations, beginning with «golden» and «Gospel», on which the poem is built. The first set of extended alliterations is the «f» alliteration, with such words as «fast-flowing», «first», «free» and «fabled», later picked up with «Firm», «fine», «Father», and «forced». The poem's «c» alliteration, one occurring on a single line, «Christ's», «charity», «charmed», and «chained», continues in «continence», «came», «court», and earlier «choke». The extended «t» alliteration is shown in such words as «That», «time», «Thecla», «Tarsus», «Twice», «tinted», «turnèd», and «tender». The «m» alliteration shows up in «Mary», «mark», «maiden», «mien», «modest», and «made, marred, and mended». It is then picked up later in «most» and «mealtime». The «n» alliteration connects «name», «next», «none», and «neighbours», the

17 Like «The Silver Jubilee», the poem attempts to revive the eclipsed reputation of an unheralded religious.

«v» alliteration contrasts «virtue» with «vice», and the extended «w» alliteration is shown in such words as «whitest», «Weeds», «wed», «Withal», «ways», «wise», «wings», and «won». By far the longest series of alliterations, the «s» alliteration, shows up in «sandy silt», along with «strike», «scrolled», «speaking», «spoke», «she», «sitting», «say», «scanned», «streets», «straight», «-slanted», «sense», «some», «such», and «Son».

Largely unread because uncommented on, «St. Thecla» is one of Hopkins's uncanonical texts orbiting around larger canonical bodies; that «while it appears to be broken off or partial», to use a Harries distinction, it is «not necessarily opposed to some existing or imagined whole» (Harries 1962, p. 8).<sup>18</sup> The rationale for considering «St. Thecla» a fragment is based on the poem's failure to mirror the entire historical account surrounding this eponymous first female Christian martyr.<sup>19</sup> It leaves off before her two trials, the one in Iconium and the more angst-filled one in Antioch (Elliott 1993). «St. Thecla» was not intended to be an expansive account of the apocryphal story, but only a truncated version of it, the taste of which has been unappreciated largely because of the bias, prejudice, or interest brought to the poem, robbing it historically of broad universal acclaim to the beautiful, which, along with Kant's subjectivist bias, is fundamental to the beautiful: the «universality of the subjective conditions of estimating objects forms the sole foundation of this universal subjective validity of the delight which we connect with the representation of the object that we call *beautiful*» (Hutchins 1952, vol. 42, p. 483). For when «we call an object beautiful» – and the Hopkins poem fragment by its very marginalization has been assigned to the unaesthetic, the vulgar – «we believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of everyone» (p. 482).

«St. Thecla» is generated by what I.A. Richards calls a «linguistic problem, whose solution by language will be the attainment and its end» (Richards 1963, p. 168): «Who thinks of Thecla?»: «the phrase to which the rest of the poem is a response – becomes, in the final version, the close» (p. 172). As Rajan observes, «the form of a poem is still seen by many critics as contingent on its closure [...] The fascination of the unfinished may be precisely that it both incites closure and resists it, that to bring it to a conclusion is both desirable, given its commitments, and inappropriate, given its procedures» (Rajan 1985, pp. 279-281). Absent any clear theory of the fragment, the governing principle appears to be that unfinished

18 Writing in *Matter and Memory* on pure memory and pure perception, Henri Bergson sees perception as impure. He describes «'pure' perception» as a «fragment of reality, detached just as it is», «unable to mingle with the perception of other bodies that of its own body», and considers it «an ideal, an extreme» (Bergson 1929, pp. 310, 317).

19 Were Hopkins to have pursued more fully the stuff of the saint's life, the poem might well have fallen prey to the heresy of the paraphrase.

poems and fragments are texts for which there are no extant fair copies, which would imply completion. «St.Thecla», then, should not be considered a fragment given the fact that there is an extant fair copy of the poem. Norman MacKenzie describes the autograph as «a fair copy with a number of emendations» (MacKenzie 1981, p. 220). And the only extant fair copy of the poem shows minimal changes, clearly indicating that Hopkins was satisfied with the result.<sup>20</sup> The poem has a finished and satisfied feel to it. There are a number of poems Hopkins considers fragments because he did not consider them finished, whether or not he had a fair copy. And of these, as Bridges observes, Hopkins often had «some 3, 4, or even 5 versions of the same poem» (Stanford 1984, vol. 2, pp. 652-653). And those «perpetual amendments and corrections», he felt, «give some trouble» (Nixon 1992, p. 287).

«St. Thecla», then, is a short version of a longer story, perhaps not unlike Hopkins's curial sonnet «Pied Beauty», which, surprisingly, has never been thought of as a fragment despite its widely acknowledged truncation. «St. Thecla» does not simply terminate before its appointed end; Hopkins elected to end it there. «A poem that is properly unfinished should be less satisfactory if we were to pursue any of the conceivable ways of finishing it» (Rajan 1985, p. 5). There is really no unintentional irresolution in the poem. As an «achieved» or «deliberate» fragment (Levinson 1986), or an «unfinished» poem (Rajan 1985), «St. Thecla» does not desire to flesh out the hagiographical and historical account of Thecla. To use Carritt's comment regarding Kant's appreciation of the beautiful, «the poet was stimulated by some interest or external experience to discover the beauty which is his poem» (Carritt 1962, p. 78). Poems ought not to be a text only slightly different, perhaps more terse and elliptical, from the account that generates it. Rather, as Smith suggests, a poem should be «unmoored from such a context, isolated from the circumstances and motives that might have occasioned it» (Smith 1968, p. 15).

The poem, moreover, shows that for Hopkins the aesthetic is a condition of the moral, the virtuous. Responding in part to Kant's subjectivity, Friedrich Schiller, in «On Grace and Dignity», repeatedly links the aesthetic to the moral, writing, for example, that «if we consider in him the moral person, we have a right to demand of his face an expression of the person», for it «requires an expression of the morality of the subject in the human face, so much, and with no less rigor, does the eye demand beauty». Ad-

20 As Norman MacKenzie has noted, the poem originally ended with line 18 (MacKenzie 1989, p. 207), and well it could, for «bed» and the new ending «spot» are points of rest or cessation from activity. One could even argue that the original ending, «ready are bower and bed», provides even more satisfactory closure than the new ending, «forced her from the spot», which sounds somewhat anti-climactic. Internally, and without any reliance on the apocryphal account, we are left wanting to know who forced her, why, and what happened?

ditionally, says Schiller, «the moral cause, which in our soul is the foundation of grace, brings, in a necessary manner [...] precisely that state which contains in itself the natural conditions of beauty»; for «the state of moral perfection is precisely in it the most favorable for the accomplishment of the physical conditions of beauty. [...] [T]he moral perfection of man cannot shine forth except from this very association of his inclination with his moral conduct» (Schiller 1899?, pp. 199-200, 206).<sup>21</sup> As Wilkinson and Willoughby would write regarding Schiller, «the two ideals of freedom, the aesthetic and the moral, are presented as two possibilities of the human psyche, constantly interacting, the relations between them never fixed. The aesthetic has to contribute to the development of the moral; and the moral then in turn takes its place within an overall aesthetic 'tone'. [...] Here we have the Aesthetic exercising its disruptive-formative influence on Moral harmony to produce a still higher Morality» (Wilkinson, Willoughby 1967, pp. lix, lxxxvii). On more than a few occasions in the poem, Hopkins ties Thecla's physical beauty to her moral condition, her virtue: «Twice lovely, tinted eastern, turnèd Greek - | Crisp lips, straight nose, and tender-slanted cheek. [...] | Withal her mien is modest, ways are wise». According to Eagleton, «Beauty is in this sense an aid to virtue, appearing as it does to rally support for our moral endeavors» (Eagleton 1990, p. 89). Singled out from Paul's sermon is destruction replaced by recreation and an aesthetic of asceticism: «Of world made, marred, and mended, lost and won; | Of virtue and vice; but most (it seemed his sense) | He praised the lovely lot of continence».

The links between beauty and morality established by the likes of Kant, Schiller, Schlegel, and others are relevant to an understanding of Hopkins's poetry, which, by focusing on the symbolic and the analogical, fits well into the tradition of a Tractarian aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> Still, Hopkins did not always recognise or acknowledge that his poetry has a deeply religious function. Even the poetry of his friend and religious sceptic, Robert Bridges, approximates the sacred.<sup>23</sup> Bridges's *The Testament of Beauty: A Poem in Four Books* (1929), by its very title, testifies to a religious (Testament) aesthetic (Beauty). One of its sonnets, «For beauty being the best of all we know», as Catherine Phillips points out, «went so far as to place beauty

21 Hopkins knew Schiller well enough to direct his friend Dixon to Schiller's riddle on the rainbow.

22 See Nixon (1989; 1994), Tennyson (1981), Grove (2006), and Johnson (1997).

23 Catherine Phillips would describe Bridges's work as of a «broad Christian kind» (Phillips 1992, p. 178). In calling Bridges a religious sceptic, I refer only to his reservations about Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism and especially his joining the Jesuits. But Bridges was a staunch Anglican, organizing *The Yattendon Hymnal*, a collection of 100 hymns to enhance worship. In *The Testament of Beauty*, he would describe Hopkins's «asceticism», his rejection of the sensual (a mere peach) as a type of «self-holocaust».



in the role normally thought of as God's» (Phillips 1992, p. 79). Hopkins's Scotist poem, «Pied Beauty», cataloging the multitudinous diversity, the variegated piedness, in the creation, generated by a single genus, the creator, declares an unbridled celebration of an altogether impure aesthetics. Hopkins's friend, biographer, and editor, Bridges drew from this poem and from «As kingfishers catch fire» in his own judgment of beauty: «Creator and mover of all as activ Lover of all, | self-express'd in not-self, without which no self were» (Bridges 1929, vol. 4, pp. 1440-1441). Hopkins routinely tied aesthetics to morality, as his poem «The Handsome Heart» illustrates: «Héart mánnery | is more than handsome face» (Phillips 1986, p. 145). We are admonished in «To What Serves Mortal Beauty» to love what are «World's loveliest – men's selves», seen most when the «Self flashes off frame and face» (p. 167). Providing his Leigh congregation a description of the human qualities of Jesus, Hopkins, in a 23 November 1879 sermon, draws on a sense of the moral, evident in the face: «far higher than beauty of the body, higher than genius and wisdom the beauty of the mind, comes the beauty of his character, his character of man» (Nixon, Barber forthcoming). Hopkins's Jesus, however, unlike the image presented by the Pre-Raphaélites, receives Aryan rather than Oriental, Middle-Eastern features, and conforms to the Victorian, Aryan iconographic tradition:

There met in J.C. all things that can make man lovely and loveable. In his body he was most beautiful. This is known first by the tradition in the Church that it was so //and by holy writers agreeing to suit those words to him Thou art beautiful in mould above the sons of men:<sup>24</sup>and we have even accounts of him written in early times. They tell us that he was moderately tall, well built and slender in frame, his features straight and beautiful, his hair inclining to auburn, parted in the midst, curling and clustering about the ears and neck as the leaves of a filbert,

24 For the psalmic use of the phrase, «Thou art beautiful in mould», see Psalm 44: 3 («Thou art beautiful above the sons of men»). This psalm is a poem for a royal bridegroom, understood by Christians as prefiguring Christ. Hopkins used the expression in a number of poems, among them «Margaret Clitheroe» («The Christ-ed beauty of her mind | Her mould of features mated well»), «The Lantern out of Doors» («Men go by me, whom either beauty bright | In mould or mind or what not else makes rare»), «The Loss of the Eurydice» («They say who saw one sea corpse cold | He was all of lovely manly mould»), «On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People» («Of favoured make and mind and health and youth»), by way of an allusion in «The Bugler's First Communion» («Breathing bloom of chastity in mansex fine»), and in «Henry Purcell» («It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal | Of own, of abrupt self»). The clearest poetic reference to the beauty of Christ himself is in the sestet of «As kingfishers catch fire»: «For Christ plays in ten thousand places, | Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his | To the Father through the features of men's faces». So even here, Christ-ed beauty is best inscaped in the features of men as well as in the natural landscape, as in «Hurrahing in Harvest»: «And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder | Majestic – as a stallion stalwart, very-violet sweet! –».

so they speak, upon the nut. This hair, was never touched as well as a forked beard He wore also a forked beard and this as well as the hair locks upon his head were never touched by razor or shears; neither, his health being perfect, could a hair ever fall to the ground.<sup>25</sup>

Hopkins grieved the loss of beauty, whether the diminished beauty in nature, found everywhere in his poetry, correspondence, and diary entries, or the compromised beauty in humans (as in Digby Dolben).<sup>26</sup> Women, especially such martyred saints like St. Winefred and Margaret Clitheroe, occupy an important place in Hopkins's lament: «The Christ-ed beauty of her mind | Her mould of features mated well» («Margaret Clitheroe», Phillips 1986, p. 126). Hopkins connects beauty of mind to the beauty of Christ's mind, the beauty, that is, of his intellectual interest and concern as well as his benevolent care. But despite Schiller's and Hopkins's conflation of the aesthetic with the moral, the aesthetic is also seen as something entirely apart. Carritt cautions, «What is distinctively beautiful need not by any means be distinctively useful, comfortable, or morally good», for «aesthetic theory, when it existed, was almost invariably distorted by the assumption that the essential thing in art was its moralizing purpose» (Carritt 1962, pp. 4, 29).<sup>27</sup> Even if the aesthetic does not necessarily (or not only) coincide with the moral, a reflection on the formal aspects and the appreciation of the beautiful in «St. Thecla» remains essential to clarifying Hopkins's contribution to the Romantic poetic fragment as a form that can inspire aesthetic emotions.

The unfinished is not simply a «variant» of the ruin: «the unfinished is other than the ruin», and as such «should not invite completion» (Rajan 1985, pp. 4-5). Regier puts it this way: «Fragmentation encourages us to look for details, and to perceive the importance of minuteness anew. It requires of us a certain attentiveness that reminds us how each fracture, textual or phenomenological, demands scrutiny in its relation to a larger structure. The relation between the two might uncover the impossibility of the broken piece to be reabsorbed into an original totality. Neverthe-

25 The human features of Jesus have much in common with Holman Hunt's lantern-carrying, Jesus, in *The Light of the World* (1851-1853).

26 The subject of Hopkins, beauty, and ugliness requires a separate study, including the beauty of nature often compromised by industrialism. His use of the terms «inscape» and «instress» speak informatively on his aesthetics. Helpful in this discussion is the chapter on Pater and a Victorian aesthetic in Nixon (1994); see also Nixon (1992), and Catherine Phillips (2007).

27 According to Kant, to determine the good in a thing is to know what that thing ought to be. But this is not necessary for the beautiful. The judgment of taste and appreciation of the beautiful cannot rely on the good, which would demand reason, cognition, objectivity, and the scientific.

less, the initial fantasy of plentitude, of wholeness, can turn out to be enabling and creative» (Regier 2010, p. 25). In Schlegel, «one of the reasons why the fragments are fragmentary, ruins and not complete edifices», is that Schlegel «wants us to intuit what might have been but never was, wants us to take the fragment and make of it a whole, take the ruin and reconstruct the edifice» (Firchow 1971 p. 18). Put similarly, «The dignity of a fragment in a poetry of self-formation lies in its finding its place in a process, in its being justified by its own extinction. It makes the truth instead of returning to it. It contributes to a whole which is neither beginning nor end but only history. The unfinished, in such a view, carries with it no natural citizenship, no whole from which it was disinherited, or from which its incompleteness has been made to proceed» (Rajan 1985, p. 249). Describing this move to where completion is enacted by the reader, Rajan talks about the fragment engaging the reader «more fully with the poem by assigning him the responsibility of joining the fragment to the implicit destiny [...]. Indeed, the reader's response can continue a poem that is formally closed and can even be guided in doing so by forces within the poem's containment» (pp. 278, 303). Or as Rauber puts it, the fragment «encourages us to continue beyond the poem; it converts the bounded into the boundless» (Rauber 1969, p. 221). Michel Foucault, in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, calls this a «positivity», to analyse a «discursive formation» by coming to terms with its «verbal performances at the level of the statements and of the form of positivity that characterizes them». In this way, a group of statements are viewed «not as the closed plethoric totality of a meaning, but as an incomplete, fragmented figure». Here we are attempting to «rediscover not the moment or the trace of their origin, but the specific forms on an accumulation», the simulacra, the text as it exists (1972, p. 125). Seen in this light, «St. Thecla», though gesturing to events beyond itself, is complete.

If a poem might be defined as a linguistic moment, then «St. Thecla» is a controlled and restrained utterance, a gesture, a historical and linguistic event. «Every beautiful thing, or, in other words, every work of art, is an individual expression, an expression of something that cannot be expressed in any other way and therefore cannot be known apart from its unique expression» (Carritt 1962, p. 118). A poem is not a neatly contained paraphraseable unit of verbal materials, but an explosive device anxious to break free from its formal container, charged and ready to go off at any time. Not an ossified, static, closed entity, a poem is a living, pulsating, dynamic, open thing. Reflecting brilliantly on the poetic process and product, Levinson writes, «Poets do not write poems that are increasingly intelligent or apropos or beautiful. They simply revise. And if the revision is good, if the guess at Heaven is truly a vision in finer tone, the poem becomes, as it were, a transitional object, able to comfort us as we die into life, repeatedly shedding our fondest illusions and acquiring some

new knowledge of terrible because pointless misery. Such poems chronicle and thereby confer upon their readers the past, the loved precursors, the outlived selves» (Levinson 1986, p. 187).

A virtually non-existent aesthetic form, the Victorian poem fragment survives only in the rediscovery of Sappho and re-appropriation of her fragments by poets such as Letitia E. Landon, Michael Field, and Swinburne. A subtle manifestation of the form resides in incomplete information and the need for evidence, as in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and *The Idylls of the King* and Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, where the poets, confronting fracture, seek to stitch things together. The only declared Victorian fragment remains Robert Browning's *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* (1833), which reveals an indebtedness to Wordsworth's autobiographical lyric *The Prelude* and Shelley's elegy *Adonais*. Browning's dramatic monologue features an unnamed speaker, who, in seeking to arrive at some knowledge of the self, addresses a woman Pauline. The poem's mirror motif reflects the Romantic tradition of the autobiographical self observing its fictional double as the poet's solipsistic persona, undertakes, in the journey of the soul, a quest for self-knowledge. Lines of asterisks, the characteristic Romantic indicator of incompleteness, wreck, and ruin, structure this poem on dreams, visions, and hallucinations. Clyde de L. Ryals describes *Pauline* as «an open-ended 'fragment' [...] reflecting the imagery of expansion and contraction adumbrated in the confession». Although Browning conceived of the work as an aborted project, Ryals warns against seeing it as an attempt instead of a completion (Ryals 1983, p. 30).

What Hopkins undertakes in his fragments, then, is quite novel to the nineteenth century. His preoccupation with the aesthetic form is at once evidence of the inheritance of Romanticism as well as its anticipation in Modernism, where the fragment would disclose its Romantic legacy.<sup>28</sup> Hopkins's fragments are poetic porcupines, miniature works of art severed and isolated from the larger whole, but entirely self-contained and unfinished in their completion. As a genre always in a state of becoming, and more than the whole of which it is a part, the unfinished teases us into thought by its suggestiveness, its openness, its organicity, its potential. The Hopkins poem fragment shows the legacy of the Romantic tradition, one aspect of his Romanticism all but ignored by critics. Poems such as «St. Thecla», in the tradition of the Romantic poem fragment and in light of the then prevailing aesthetic theories, strive to make sense of our ideas of taste, beauty, purity, and completeness. «[I]n reality no purely aesthetic

28 See, for example, Jacques Barzun on the four phases of Romanticism. According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, nineteenth-century literature is «Romantic». Romanticism has «a recognizable general meaning and serves as a broad stylistic description of a whole era [...]. Modernism has been used, from time to time, analogously to Romanticism, to suggest the general temper of the twentieth-century arts» (Bradbury, McFarlane 1991, p. 23).

effect can be met with», for «the excellence of a work of art can only consist in its greater approximation to its ideal of aesthetic purity» (Schiller 1899?, p. 97). Hopkins's «St. Thecla» is a shard of pottery and poetry, a magnificent mutilation, cut off from the whole, but an entirely pleasing aesthetic experience.

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## Transgressive Art «Before the Mirror» Swinburne, Hardy, Kristeva

Roger Ebbatson  
(Lancaster University, UK)

**Abstract** This article seeks to contrast and compare the function and effect of the aesthetic gaze in a group of «mirror» poems, focusing upon issues of representation and the male gaze in Swinburne's «Before the Mirror» and three poems by Hardy, «The Cheval Glass», «I Look into My Mirror» and «Lament of the Looking Glass». The analysis is focused and theorised with reference not only to the Lacanian mirror-phase but also the notation of aesthetic and cultural transgression in Bataille and Blanchot. Discussion focuses particularly on the 'ghostly' sensuality of Swinburne's 'pleasures' and 'pains' in terms of the aesthetics of decadence and the representation of the subject-in-process. It is argued that the symbolist ekphrasis of Swinburne's poetics gives way, in Hardy, to a poetic language which echoes and transmutes the fading materiality of dialect and folk speech.

**Keywords** Decadence. Materiality. Mirror-image. Selfhood.

There is no limit to what can be said in the text.  
(Julia Kristeva)

A comparative reading of mirror poems by Swinburne and Hardy may illuminate elements of the «impure aesthetic» which became increasingly manifest in the transition period between Decadence and the Modern Movement. In particular, the figurations projected by these textual mirrors might be construed in Foucauldian terms as intermediate spaces suspended between utopia and heterotopia: the mirror, that is to say, is a placeless place in which the self is both sacrificed and regained – a notion which problematises or destabilises the Lacanian identification of the mirror-stage with the establishment of identity. The aesthetic gaze into or out of the mirror in Swinburne and Hardy serves both to endorse and to destroy the work of art, but the transgressive impulse is quite distinct in the two cases. In what Oscar Wilde characterised as Swinburne's «very perfect and poisonous poetry» (Wilde 2001, p. 20) it may be premised that the artist's gaze undermines the aesthetic object in a transgressive movement hinted at in a formulation of Maurice Blanchot:

Transgression belongs to neither day nor night. Never does it encounter the law that is however everywhere. Transgression: the unavoidable

accomplishment of what is *impossible* to accomplish – which might be called dying itself. (Blanchot 1992, p. 107)

In signalling or recording what might be termed the death of the art object, Swinburne's aesthetic acts of transgression, most notably in *Poems and Ballads*, break with the accepted rules of verse and are metaphorically equivalent to sexual transgression in their heady eroticism. Hardy's verse representations of the mirror, by contrast, emphasise a characteristically human world which, in Bataille's terms, «is finally but a hybrid of transgression and prohibition, so that the word *human* always denotes a *system* of contradictory impulses» (Bataille 1991, p. 342). The trajectory from the exoticism of *Poems and Ballads* to the more communal, quotidian world of Hardy represents a complex literary negotiation with the world of outer reality. Swinburne's mirror functions to undermine metaphorical and ego-centric stability, whilst for Hardy the mirror-image offers an ambivalent reassurance. The textual mirror representations of both poets, however, are shadowed or refracted by wider social determinants, since, as Graham McPhee has argued, the claim of aesthetic autonomy is only «made possible and is conditioned by the world of commodity production» in a cultural formation «within which the subject ironically comes to regard itself as the 'free producer' of the scene it confronts» (McPhee 2002, p. 115). In Swinburne's poetry the increasing pressure of the administered world compels an aesthetic adoption of distance and a cultivation of esoteric and erotic material felt to be at odds with commodification: this is, in effect, a poetry of refusal. Hardy's art, by contrast, even at its most inward and personal, retains potent echoes of a Lukácsian «integrated civilisation» with its linguistic and thematic memories of the culture and language patterns of the folk.

In terms of the creation of an imaginary space Swinburne's textual density, with its complex repetitions and symmetries, enables the reader to become the uniquely self-conscious spectator of his/her own imaginative processes, whilst the register of Hardy's verse gestures towards a more realist manner of address. Dee Reynolds's argument *vis à vis* Mallarmé might be relevant here, suggesting that the «ideal text (the 'livre') is a model of reflexive consciousness», and that «In reality, text and reader have need of each other to create this reflexivity». She goes on, «The modern reader, Mallarmé believes, wishes the text to function as a mirror» (Reynolds 1995, p. 87). In this writing project the text is experienced «as a 'mirror' of imaginary activity» in an oscillation between «textual and imaginary space» (p. 90). By contrast, what happens in Swinburne is suggested by Reynolds's observation, in relation to Rimbaud and Mallarmé, that «this apparently increased autonomy of the pictorial 'language' can lead to increased reliance on verbal language». This artistic process, however, may be modified by noting that Mallarmé, like Hardy, «believed that poetry should preserve links with orality» (pp. 196, 201).

In 1865 James McNeill Whistler exhibited a painting at the Royal Academy entitled *The Little White Girl*. Two years later the artist added the words «Symphony in White No. 2» to the title. It has been pertinently observed that these «two titles serve to symbolise Whistler's evolving aesthetic position, and to reflect his gradual disillusion with the earthy Realism he found in Courbet's pictures» (Dorment, MacDonald 1994, p. 78). The painting shows Whistler's Irish mistress, Joanna Hiffernan, gazing into the mirror over the chimney-piece in a room in Whistler's London home. It has been noted that the wedding-ring the model displays «draws attention to an implied narrative», but that the spectator «is finally denied a Victorian 'subject' of the sort beloved of Royal Academicians» (p. 78). Prior to the first exhibition of the painting, Swinburne composed his verse-ballad «Before the Mirror», which Whistler had printed on gold paper and pasted onto the frame, stanzas four and six being also incorporated into the catalogue. The poet assured Whistler that the poem was «entirely and only suggested [...] by the picture», in which he perceived «the metaphor of the rose and the notion of sad and glad mystery in the face languidly contemplative of its own phantom» (Hayes 2000, p. 348). The gaze here is enigmatically inclined, as the poet demands,

Behind the veil, forbidden,  
Shut up from sight,  
Love, is there sorrow hidden,  
Is there delight?  
(ll. 8-10) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

Hillis Miller, interrogating D.G. Rossetti's poem «Body's Beauty», asks: «What is the secret that the distorting mirror always tells and keeps?», and responds, «Loss» (Miller 1991, p. 336).<sup>1</sup> And in exploring the Pre-Raphaélite valences of Whistler's painting, Anne Anderson reads the female subject as being «engrossed in the act of seeing her past» in a depiction which takes the form «of reflected memory which at once doubles and divides the mirror-gazing subject's identity» (Anderson 2010, pp. 126, 125). Certainly Swinburne's supplementary text, in imagining the thoughts of the young woman, projects a self-centred idiolect – «I watch my face, and wonder | At my bright hair» (ll. 24-25; Hayes 2000, p. 104) – in a construction which gestures, as Cassandra Laity observes, towards «a romantic and erotic portrait of female narcissism». The girl's «white» hand, Laity suggests, «may signify both the forbidden ethos of masturbation and the passive attitude of the girl's voyeurism» (Laity 1996, pp. 36, 77). In this somewhat baffling scenario the female subject remains uncommunicative

1 On the Victorian motif of the mirror also see J.B. Bullen (1998, pp. 123-148).

and inscrutable, and as William Wilson notes, «not only is she apart from nature, but her meaning resists the poet's attempts at interpretation» (Wilson 1984, p. 428). The dialectic of shifting sexual identities is played out by the enquiry,

Art thou the ghost, my sister,  
White sister there,  
Am I the ghost, who knows?  
(ll. 31-33) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

In surveying the literary history of lesbianism as «a history of derealisation», Terry Castle asks, «What better way to exorcise the threat of female homosexuality than by treating it as ghostly?». She perceives a series of «spectralising moments» in the literature of the nineteenth century, «a phantasmagorical association between ghosts and lesbians» to which Swinburne's lines may covertly allude as part of a literary project, as Castle phrases it, «to derealise the threat of lesbianism by associating it with the apparitional» (Castle 1993, pp. 34, 60, 62). Swinburne's poem thus poses the question of the instability of human emotion *vis à vis* the fixity of art, whilst the ghostly «sister» is transmuted, in the final section of the poem, with its echoes of «The Lady of Shalott», into the «glowing ghosts of flowers» which reflect and refract the passing of time:

Old loves and faded fears  
Float down a stream that hears  
The flowing of all men's tears beneath the sky.  
(ll. 61-64) (Hayes 2000, p. 105)

Catherine Maxwell aptly discerns the contradictory impulse of this text, which subverts the Victorian trope of the «fragile or vulnerable maiden» with the suggestion that there is concealment surrounding the topic of sexual love which lies «Behind the veil» (Maxwell 2006, p. 33). Her analysis may be supplemented by the argument of Kathy Alexis Psomiades, in respect of the painting, that the young woman possesses «two selves, a manifest surface of lovely accessibility and a hidden depth of darker and more mysterious meaning». She perceives «two faces», «one beautiful and empty» and a «darker» one representing «the doubled figure of femininity» which «prefigures the inevitable abandonment of the female body to commodity culture». Psomiades notes how, in Swinburne's poem, the «domestic trappings of the painted room», notably the vase, are missing, an absence denoting a Swinburnian aestheticism which «eschews objects» apart from those which «reside in the aestheticised, eroticised, psychologised depths of femininity». She goes on:

By shifting the girl's gaze from the vase to her own face, Swinburne's stanzas focus on the way the mirror holds the girl and her reflection together in a self-enclosed narcissism structured like the self-enclosed space of autonomous art. (Psomiades 1997, pp. 108, 109, 110, 122)

Consideration of this type of «mirror» poem might inevitably call up some allusion to Lacanian theory, and certainly both Swinburne's text and Whistler's painting elicit a sense of that «spatial intuition» which Julia Kristeva, in her reading of Lacan, discerns «at the heart of the functioning of signification» (Kristeva 1984, p. 46). The constitution of the subject through the founding of the image, according to this account, serves to institute that primary narcissism which marks Swinburne's poem, with its «Dead mouths of many dreams that sing and sigh» (l. 56; Hayes 2000, p. 105). Kristeva contends, in this regard, that «Positing the imaged ego leads to the positing of the object, which is, likewise, separate and signifiable». The sign, that is to say, «can be conceived as the voice that is projected from the agitated body» (Kristeva 1984, p. 46):

«I cannot see what pleasures  
Or what pains were;  
What pale new loves and treasures  
New years will bear».  
(ll. 36-39) (Hayes 2000, p. 105)

If the mirror stage establishes the crucial separation from the mother's body, then as Kristeva claims, «the *fort-da* game, anality and orality all act as a permanent negativity that destroys the image» (Kristeva 1984, p. 47), in a process of splitting motivated by the castration complex hinted at in the girl's hand, visualised as «a fallen rose». The phallus which dominates Lacanian theory is notably hidden or occluded in this text, «Behind the veil, forbidden», and yet it is, Kristeva maintains, that which «makes enunciation possible». The enigmatic female subject portrayed by Whistler and Swinburne, it may be suggested, suffers the Lacanian severance from the mother through «the mirror stage and castration» (p. 48). But the drive towards signification, or the symbolic order, is, Kristeva suggests, disturbed and intermittent: «In the speaking subject, fantasies articulate this irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier», to the extent that they «disrupt the signifier and shift the metonymy of desire [...] onto a jouissance» which «turns back toward the autoerotic body», just as the girl gazes enigmatically at her self. Do Whistler's painting and Swinburne's poem, thus, enigmatically stage that «imaginary castration that must be evaded in order to return to the maternal *chora*»? (pp. 49, 51). In her account of Kristevan theory, Kelly Oliver appositely writes:

Whereas Lacan sees the mirror phase as the onset of the subject through its entry into the world of the signifier, Kristeva hears the murmur of subjectivity before the mirror stage in a subterranean world out of which the signifier develops. (Oliver 1998, p. 84)

It has been argued that, whilst the «image of the concave mirror, often called '*miroir concentrique*', is used by all kinds of writers [...] to mean whatever he likes», the «flat» mirror, by contrast, «signifies a photographic reproduction of concrete reality» (Iknayan 1983, p. 151). In *The Mirror and the Lamp* M.H. Abrams definitively traced the ways in which a work of art functioned as «a useful adjunct to the mirror for clarifying the less obvious mimetic quality of an art like poetry, which reflects the visible world indirectly». At the same time, Abrams persuasively annotated the Romantic movement's instigation of a symptomatic and widespread change «from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues» (Abrams 1953, pp. 33, 57). Whistler's female subject appears to the (male?) viewer as a self-absorbed figure:

I watch my face, and wonder  
At my bright hair;  
Nought else exalts or grieves  
The rose at heart, that heaves  
With love of her own leaves and lips that pair.  
(ll. 24-28) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

Swinburne's poem, however, may be interpreted as the type of discourse identified by Mieke Bal, «where female narcissism thinly veils male desire», staging a scenario in which the mirror is to be taken (by the male viewer) as «the sign of woman's vanity». This «traditional mirror function», Bal argues, is related to male sexuality, since «women's vanity is a desired feature of women» (Bal 1996, p. 38). In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray postulates à propos the male voyeur,

if this ego is to be valuable, some «mirror» is needed to reassure it and re-insure it of its value. Woman will be the foundation for this specular duplication, giving man back «his» image and repeating it as the «same». (Irigaray 1985, p. 54)

The poem, with its dialectic between the «pleasures» and «pains» of self-contemplation, «wanders in Pre-Raphaélite languor», as William Wilson phrases it, «while the White Girl anatomises her own beauty», ultimately to return «to the aesthetic image of the rose» in a process in which «she expresses the *self as other*» (Wilson 1984, p. 431):



Deep in the gleaming glass  
 She sees all past things pass,  
 And all sweet life that was lie down and die.  
 (ll. 47-49) (Hayes 2000, p. 105)

Swinburne's contemporary Havelock Ellis, in his formulation of sexual desire, had explored male and female narcissism as a source of pleasure and identity, and late-nineteenth century ideology would notably focus upon the scene of the woman seeing herself, as Laurence Birken notes, «through the eyes of the man, desiring herself because she desires what the male desires». However there is, at this *fin de siècle* juncture, Birken maintains, a «dissolution of gender that accompanies the transition from a production-ist to a consumerist complex of values» (Birken 1988, pp. 54, 144).

Whistler's painting poses an interpretive challenge:

Love, is there sorrow hidden,  
 Is there delight?  
 Is joy thy dower or grief,  
 White rose of weary leaf,  
 Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light?  
 (ll. 10-14) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

This uncertainty arises because, as Kaja Silverman argues more generally, «no identity can be sustained in the absence of the gaze of the Other». For Silverman, «the mirror stage and the photo session» function as «emblems of femininity» at this historical moment, and her reading of this cultural formation possesses a peculiar implication for both painting and poem:

The fantasmatic generates erotic *tableaux* [...] in which the subject is arrestingly positioned – whose function is, in fact, precisely to display the subject in a given place. (Silverman 1998, pp. 149, 162, 216)

If, as Catherine Maxwell suggests, Swinburne's female subject serves as «a figure for the artist or poet», then it follows that «the mirror of art [...] allows ways of objectifying and aestheticising one's past» (Maxwell 2006, p. 39). Martin Danahay, in an analysis of D.G. Rossetti's poem «The Mirror», remarks how «even the image the subject perceives in the mirror is not a 'pure' representation of the perceiving 'I'». The artist, Danahay argues, «attempting to represent 'his own' must pass through the mediation of that which is not 'his own'». The cases of both Rossetti and Whistler exemplify how, as Danahay observes, «women's supposed narcissism held a powerful attraction for Victorian men» (Danahay 1994, p. 38). At the same time the contemplation of the female body through Swinburne's liquidly expressive medium accords with Kristeva's argument that «har-

mony, rhythm, the 'sweet', 'pleasant' sounds and poetic musicality found in symbolist poetry [...] may be interpreted as oralisation», in a structure of feeling gesturing towards «a devouring fusion» with the mother's body (Kristeva 1984, p. 153). Kristeva situates such a poetic within the pressures of the era, arguing that symbolist poetry strove to overcome «the symbolic order and the technocratic technologies» by disturbing «the logic that dominated the social order» (p. 83). This disturbance, as Maxwell's interpretation proposes, here also takes the form of a challenge to perceived late-Victorian gender roles, and Kristeva's diagnosis resonates notably with the valences of Swinburne's text:

Behind the veil, forbidden,  
Shut up from sight,  
Love, is there sorrow hidden,  
Is there delight?  
(ll. 8-11) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

By raising the veil of mystery the nineteenth century had held over sexuality, Freud's discovery designated sexuality as the nexus between language and society, drives and the socio-symbolic order. (Kristeva 1984, p. 84)

In an explication of Kristeva's position, Kelly Oliver pertinently remarks, «if, as Lacan says, the Phallus can be effective only when veiled, behind the veil is the paternal body in all of its contingency and uncertainty» (Lechte, Zournazi 2003, p. 46). In an essay on Bergson, T.E. Hulme contended that «Between nature and ourselves, even between ourselves and our own consciousness, there is a veil, a veil that is dense with the ordinary man, transparent for the artist and the poet». It is the function of the artist, Hulme declares, to pierce «the veil placed between us and reality» (Csengeri 1994, pp. 198, 193). Irigaray argues that the «metaphorical veil of the eternal female covers up the sex organ seen as castrated»: «To sell herself, woman has to veil as best she can how priceless she is in the sexual economy». This is because, Irigaray maintains in terms relevant to Whistler's painting,

Woman has no gaze, no discourse for her specific specularisation that would allow her to identify with herself (as same) – to return into the self – or break free of the natural specular process that now holds her. (Irigaray 1985, pp. 82, 115, 224)

James Heffernan has appositely suggested that, in Romanticism, «the veil signifies precisely what poetic language imposes on natural objects»:

At once revealing and obscuring, allowing flashes of recognition and yet surrounding objects with an alien light, the transparent veil of language is the verbal counterpart of atmospheric transformation at its most intense. (Heffernan 1984, p. 160)

Angus Fletcher has pertinently argued that literary difficulty paradoxically serves as «a source of pleasure», because «Obscurity stirs curiosity; the reader wants to tear the veil aside» (Fletcher 1964, p. 235). The dialectical relation between Whistler's art-object and Swinburne's poem might productively be framed with reference to Walter Benjamin's analysis of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, where he defines what he terms «semblance» as an aesthetic attribute «which belongs to the essentially beautiful as the veil and as the essential law of beauty». This entails that «beauty appears as such only when it is veiled», so that «the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil». The business of art criticism is thus crucially posited upon «the impossibility of unveiling»:

The task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful [...] to the view of the beautiful as that which is secret.

The work of art, Benjamin argues, could only be grasped «where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret», because «the divine ground of the being of beauty lies in the secret». Art and nature are the only spheres «where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain», since «in veiless nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn» (Benjamin 1996, pp. 350, 351). It may indeed be that for the female subject, as Hillis Miller speculates, there is a possibility that the mirror-stage functions not for «the discovery of one's self», but rather for «the discovery of a vacancy there, and an empty glass» (Miller 1991, p. 329).

The implications of Swinburne's text were to be potently refracted in a slightly later poem, Mary Coleridge's «The Other Side of a Mirror» (1882). Swinburne's contrastive «White rose in red rose-garden | Is not so white» is here reimagined as a more specifically sexualised and gendered image:

Her lips were open – not a sound  
Came through the parted lines of red.  
Whate'er it was, the hideous wound  
In silence and in secret bled.  
No sigh relieved her speechless woe,  
She had no voice to speak her dread.  
(Avery 2010, p. 33)

In her reading of the poem Christine Battersby relates this to Luce Irigaray's contrast between red and white blood in a scheme which suggests that

Whiteness is the language of purity, and a dead, static, specularised nature. Against this whiteness, «redness» is used to suggest a form of identity that bleeds onto otherness. (Battersby 1996, p. 263)

She further argues, in a comment also pertinent to Swinburne, that it is as if the poet «seems only to be able to sense her own interiority via an elaborate alignment of her body against the male gaze». Indeed, Battersby suggestively contends that the female poet «situates herself on both sides of the mirror, and on neither side of the mirror», in a scenario which elicits a revealingly polarised textual dialectic which is masked or submerged in Whistler and Swinburne:

On the one hand, there is the flesh that bleeds with a «hideous wound» [...] On the other hand, there is female flesh whitened into an unnatural purity. (pp. 253, 262, 264)

In an influential essay which sought to distinguish between romanticism and classicism, T.E. Hulme argued that the Romantic movement had «debauched» readers into a cult of «some form of vagueness», whilst himself advocating verse «strictly confined to the earthly and the definite». Romantic verse exists «at a certain pitch of rhetoric», Hulme argues, adding laconically, «The kind of thing you get in Hugo or Swinburne» (Csengeri 1994, pp. 66, 63). Hulme's definition helps to map the differences in textual procedure between «Before the Mirror» and a group of mirror poems by Thomas Hardy, of which «The Lament of the Looking-Glass» might serve as exemplar:

Words from the mirror softly pass  
To the curtains with a sigh:  
«Why should I trouble again to glass  
These smileless things hard by,  
Since she I pleased once, alas,  
Is now no longer nigh!

«I've imaged shadows of the coursing cloud,  
And of the plying limb  
On the pensive pine when the air is loud  
With its aerial hymn;  
But never do they make me proud  
To catch them within my rim!

«I flash back phantoms of the night  
 That sometimes flit by me,  
 I echo roses red and white –  
 The loveliest blooms that be –  
 But now I never hold to sight  
 So sweet a flower as she».  
 (Gibson 1981, pp. 674-675)

Such a juxtaposition emphasises crucial differences in poetic procedure between Swinburne and Hardy, differences relating to vocabulary (the characteristic awkwardness of «smileless», or the uncompromisingly utilitarian «rim»), metaphor and structure, factors peculiarly concentrated and compacted in the rhythmic patterns of the two poems.

Hardy's relationship with Swinburne was both admiring and ambivalent. As a young man he had been deeply influenced by the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, acknowledging in his elegy for the poet, «A Singer Asleep», the dramatic effect in «Victoria's formal middle time» of those «passionate pages»:

Fraught with hot sighs, sad laughters, kisses, tears;  
 Fresh-fluted notes, yet from a minstrel who  
 Blew them not natively, but as one who knew  
 Full well why he thus blew.  
 (p. 323)

In composing his most overtly «Decadent» novel, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, (1892), Hardy was pleased to tell Swinburne, in a somewhat back-handed compliment, «I often thought of lines of yours during the writing» (Purdy, Millgate 1980, vol. 2, p. 158). However, Hardy's own verse sought to move beyond the «dilatory space» of Decadence or Symbolism, and he would memorably bid farewell to these tendencies in the auratic closing lines of his elegy:

I leave him, while the daylight gleam declines  
 Upon the capes and chines.  
 (Gibson 1981, p. 325)<sup>2</sup>

William Empson appositely remarked upon «a quality in Hardy easiest called good rhythm» which is allied with «a certain clumsiness that fits his grim scenery». Crucially for Empson, in Hardy «it is a closeness to the accent of spoken English won through indifference to the poetic conven-

2 Hardy's elegy for Swinburne is discussed in Ebbatson (2013) and Karlin (2013).

tions of his time» (Empson 1988, p. 422). This insight lies at the heart of Hardy's verse structure, as for example in the clarity and yet the mystery inherent in the speech of the mirror, whose «echo» of «roses red and white» plays upon and yet distances itself from Swinburne's characteristic falling rhythm in «White rose of weary leaf». The sense of loss which counterbalances the energy of the «shadows of the coursing cloud», or the «plying limb», is confined to the «smileless thing hard by», whilst the treasured «she» «Is no longer nigh». Francesco Marroni has remarked that, for Hardy, «objects possess voices of their own that have something to say about the unfathomable and intricate networks of human experiences». Each object celebrated in the verse thus «seems to be immune to mortality» and thus enabled to «perform a double function by simultaneously offering and negating the presence of their [...] owners» (Marroni 2009, p. 19). «The Lament of the Looking-Glass» constitutes what Marroni designates an «object-poem» in which the object paradoxically comes to life with the absence or loss of the human in a trajectory which problematises the issue of being and stands in marked contrast to that Swinburnian eschewal of the object identified by Psomiades. It has been appositely observed, by Dennis Taylor, that for Hardy, «the poem is an archaic crystallisation of prose»:

The poem seems to recapitulate the historical process by which the fresh speech rhythms of the people become the metrical rhythms of the poet. (Taylor 1988, p. 114)

In this process, as Taylor tellingly argues, «a once living speech becomes a living echo», so that «the sound symbolism is an echo of once was». In this verse structure, «The relic of vitality [...] is caught beautifully in Hardy's classic image of a mirror series» (pp. 119, 136, 163).

A second Hardy mirror poem, «The Cheval-Glass», dramatises another scene of loss and regret, as the narrator quizzes a man apparently living in the colonies as to why, a «Picture of bachelor gloom», he gazes into «that great cheval-glass». The man explains that as a tenant-farmer at home in England he had admired «the parson's daughter, | A creature of nameless charm» who was won by a rival in a misalliance followed by the young woman's «ill-usage», mental affliction and subsequent demise. Upon the ensuing death of the parson «Everything was to be sold», and the speaker thus acquired the full-length mirror at auction:

«Well, I awaited the sale and bought it...  
There by my bed it stands,  
And as the dawn expands  
Often I see her pale-faced form there  
Brushing her hair's bright bands».  
(Gibson 1981, pp. 360-361)

This is a text which invites interpretation as another Hardy-esque expression of lost opportunities and belated regret, and possessing a biographical resonance identified by F.B. Pinion, who conjectures that the text was «occasioned by the memory of Emma Hardy's pale-faced form in a mirror, as she brushed 'her hair's bright bands'» (Pinion 1976, p. 109). There is another dimension to this text, however, signalled in the disturbing concluding lines:

«So that it was for its revelations  
I brought it oversea,  
And drag it about with me...  
Anon I shall break it and bury its fragments  
Where my grave is to be».  
(Gibson 1981, p. 361)

The mirror here functions as a record of what has passed away in the protagonist's «ancient England» with its traditional indices of valley farm and village parsonage, whilst the plot of the poem hints at a class tension which has debarred the man, as a tenant-farmer, from marrying above him. In its staging of the reminiscent human voice the poem alludes to what Sue Edney describes, à propos of William Barnes, as a «sense of what was familiar and stable in the life of the small farmhouse [...] always underpinned by anxiety over change» (Edney 2009, p. 212). The removal overseas and the obsessive clinging to the awkwardly-sized mirror which fills the man's «narrow room» refracts a deep-seated sense of upheaval and crisis focused in the loss of the beloved object. The direct speech utterance of the man's riposte gestures towards what Paul de Man defined as language's «*errance*, a kind of permanent exile», whilst he added in a phrase germane to Hardy's poem, «it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled» (De Man 1986, p. 92). The young female subject of «The Cheval-Glass» appears to have exchanged the law of one father for another with dire results, illustrating what Anne-Marie Smith, in a Kristevan commentary, has observed, namely that:

Woman's foothold in the phallic order of the symbolic is precarious and for this reason when that order fails, her love life [...] falters, she is open to the estrangement and marginality of her condition. For this she is more susceptible to depression. (Lechte, Zournazi 2003, p. 137)

The «far rumours of her ill-usage | Came, like a chilling breath», her lover recalls, and in the end «her mind lost balance». His fantasised recollection of the young woman gazing into the mirror to brush her hair refracts, in its pitiable scenario, the process whereby, according to Kristeva, the «narcissistic self» «projects out of itself what it experiences as danger-



ous or unpleasant», enacting a figure of the double «as a defence put up by a distraught self» (Kristeva 1991, p. 183). Such self-alienation is common to both Hardy's protagonists: the tenant-farmer has moved to the colonies in order to forget in a Kristevan trajectory outlined by Miglena Nikolchina, who observes that it is deprivation which «initiates the entry of the speaking being into language». She suggests further that language «unfolds like a foreign country out of the loss of the motherland», in what is «always a language of want, of lack», to the extent that «the speaking being is constituted, therefore, *as an exile*». Indeed, Nikolchina concludes in terms relevant to Hardy's farmer, «Exile is thus the eternal destiny of the speaking being» (Lechte, Zournazi 2003, p. 162). In such Hardy-esque textualisation poetry functions as what may be termed the memory of language.

At «pallid midnight moments», the lover fantasises,  
Quick will she come to my call,  
Smile from the frame withal  
Ponderingly, as she used to regard me  
Passing her father's wall.  
(Gibson 1981, p. 361)

The farmer has transported the mirror «oversea» for the sake of its «revelations», whilst also planning its ultimate fragmentation and burial. Such an action, it might be suggested, embodies not only the destruction of the aesthetic/erotic object of desire but also the collapse of the old life-ways. Indeed, in her study of Wessex folklore, Ruth Firor records that breaking a mirror was interpreted as marking «the death of a friend». She further notes,

The broken mirror is only a small part of a larger primitive fear, and the same is true of the falling portrait. Shadows, reflections in shining surfaces like water or mirrors, any image or likeness, were once thought to hold the soul of their original, a soul which might too readily be coaxed or driven away from its body. (Firor 1962, pp. 15-16)

The plan of Hardy's speaker in this poem refracts that wider social disintegration which was marked, in Barnes and Hardy, by the loss of the verbal materiality of dialect speech as marker of the rooted culture of Wessex. The proposed burial of the mirror answers to the farmer's erotic loss and also to his displacement and alienation from his native agricultural roots. The male lover's insistence that he will in time break and bury the fragments of the cheval-glass refracts or reimagines a masculinist question posed by Hillis Miller à propos Rossetti:

Why is it that when we men contemplate not ourselves in the mirror but our incongruous other self, a desirable woman contemplating herself, our own integrity is mutilated, destroyed? (Miller 1991, p. 334)

Danahay sees the male viewer as being «mutilated in this exchange», in which the woman functions as «both object of desire and as a *femme fatale*, a woman who destroys the male as subject» (Danahay 1994, p. 40). Such a diagnosis suggests that the destructive action of Hardy's protagonist is in the last analysis the staging of a self-mutilation or even castration.

It is the estrangement of one's own mirror image which motivates Hardy's poem, «I Look into My Glass»:

I look into my glass,  
And view my wasting skin,  
And say, «Would God it came to pass  
My heart had shrunk so thin!»

For then, I, undistrest  
By hearts grown cold to me,  
Could lonely wait my endless rest  
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,  
Part steals, lets part abide;  
And shakes this fragile frame at eve  
With throbbings of noontide.  
(Gibson 1981, p. 81)

Kristeva maintains that it was through the Romantic movement that the «heterogeneous notion of the *unconscious* sprang forth», creating «within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness*» to the extent that «we are our own foreigners, we are divided». Hardy's poem, in its self-alienation, enacts the Freudian lesson of «how to detect foreigners in ourselves» (Kristeva 1991, pp. 181, 191). There is, however, also an element of what Rodolphe Gasché terms «recapturing recognition» on the author's part here, embodying Gasché's contention that

In the reflection of the mirror-subject as an annulment of the mirroring subject's former alienation, the reflection of the Other becomes a reflection of self. The mirror's self-reflection is the embracing whole that allows it to release itself into Other, which explains why it faces an object in the first place and why it returns reflexively to itself. (Gasché 1986, p. 21)

Thus it is, according to Gasché, that the «alienation of the mirror in its Other and the reflection of the object are linked together in such a way as to form a totality» (p. 21). For Swinburne and Whistler, it may be suggested, the work of art functions as what Gerald Bruns defines as «another object that consciousness constructs for itself – a non-mimetic or purely formal object, one determined by traditional canons of beauty», whereas in the more exploratory mode adopted, for example by Hardy, «the work is now defined precisely as a limit of consciousness». «I Look into My Glass», that is to say, exhibits a Levinasian «materiality of being» which overwhelms the ageing poet (Bruns 2002, p. 211). Levinas maintains, in terms resonant with implications for a reading of Hardy's text, that

The face is not in front of me, but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death [...] the face is the other who asks him not to die alone. (Cohen 1986, p. 24)

In his poem Hardy confronts the issue of identity by staging the manifestation of the figure of the double, of the self as Other. In such a case, as has been argued in relation to Kafka, «the individual will have ceded its place to the *doppelgänger*, to the subject who is not permitted to ever say 'I am I'» (Vardoulakis 2010, p. 227). Indeed, «I Look into My Glass» is open to the kind of Lacanian reading posited by Thomas Weiskel's account of the sublime, which suggests that

The self is originally constituted as an Other in the moment of identifying with an image which appears to exist «outside», typically its own reflection. (Weiskel 1976, p. 150)

In sum, it may be suggested, whilst Swinburne, in his mirror poem, exploits and elaborates the possibilities of the self-referential reflexivity entailed in the *fin de siècle* symbolist creed, Hardy by contrast chooses literally to face the metaphysical and textual problems posed by an endlessly challenging self-alienation in his willing embrace of the «impure aesthetic» of artistic realism. It is thus a postulate of this argument that the self-evidently transgressive valence of Swinburne's poem, in its sensationalist projection of the mirror-stage and the male gaze, in effect marks a certain complicity with an evolving market economy. Hardy's mirror poems, through their staging of an echoic folk voice, by contrast articulate a more radical response to the cultural damage inflicted by the emergence of the administered society.

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## Impure Researches, or Literature, Marketing and Aesthesis

### The Case of Ouida's «A Dog of Flanders» (1871-Today)

Andrew King

(University of Greenwich, UK)

**Abstract** ‘Impure researches’ are those that mix methodologies and types of data, and in particular remind readers that reading is an impure bodily as well as mental experience. The article argues that if we neglect how our perception of the material format of a text affects our understanding, we stand to risk being blind to how a text comprises the ever increasing sum of the history of its sensuous presentation and perception. It takes as a case study the publication history of Ouida's most popular short story, «A Dog of Flanders» (1871). The story has uniformly been defined as a children's story from the late twentieth century onwards, yet this labelling is a result of marketing decisions that arose in the 1890s which affected the material format the story appeared in and thereafter the interpretative choices of critics and readers in general. By polluting both literary and book history through my own corporeal encounters with various material forms of this text, I am seeking to exemplify, in an iterable, practical way, claims by feminist and queer critics whose «return to the body» risks at times appearing immaterial and generic.

**Keywords** «Dog of Flanders». Materiality of reading. Ouida. Print history.

Where does aesthetic literary impurity lie? Is it somehow ‘in’ the literary text, perhaps as a message or code that seeks to demarcate or query a boundary that determines the difference between good and bad taste, the disinterested and interested, commerce and art, dirty and clean? Might we regard impurity as the melding of distinct genres or discourses to various degrees, or the grafting of one onto another with various levels of ease or tension?

The answer is yes to all of these of course. But we can also think of aesthetic attention to impurity as a methodological procedure. In a good deal of literary studies, attention to our perception of the material signs which comprise a text – the *aesthesis* of a text – still remains a devalued or circumscribed mode of enquiry. In its interpretative procedures, words are treated by close reading, for instance, as insubstantial abstract units regardless of their physical format. «History of the Book», where we may expect attention to the materiality of textual objects, has largely split off from literature to become a separate discipline and has sought to carve itself out a distinct niche by focussing on quantitative business history

rather than textual interpretation. «History of the Book» may study reading but it does not often offer readings – certainly not close ones. Recently, perhaps unjustly, narratives such as book history tells have themselves been dismissed as merely «positivist» by the controversial V21 Collective (2015). A growing development in literary studies related to V21, Digital Humanities, is concerned in some of its research questions with how perception and understanding are related – one of its key texts emphasises «a move beyond a privileging of the textual, emphasizing graphical methods of knowledge production and organization, design as an integral component of research, transmedia crisscrossings, and an expanded concept of the sensorium of humanistic knowledge» (Burdick et al. 2012, p. 122). But again, like «History of the Book», its principal questions concern more how the underlying imperceptible determines the visible and interpretable, rather than the interpretation of sense data: in place of the ledgers and archives, printing presses and colporteurs that book history reveals as essential elements of the literary text before us on the desk, Digital Humanities offers bytes and code. At its most confident, the quantitative analysis of «Big Data» characteristic of the dominant trend in Digital Humanities makes claims to reality based on coverage vaster than any human body could hope to digest or even encounter in a lifetime. The reality it presents is supra-corporeal, swirling perhaps in chaotic flux (a chaos that mathematics can of course chart) but cleansed of the body's mess and its sensory limitations.

My procedure here, although by no means repudiating the electronic, seeks to offer a different reality from book history, V21, Digital Humanities and traditional literary studies. It is a bodily one that is alert not just to the corporeal but also to the temporally limited data I derive from tactile and visual encounters with volumes in my hands. I shall mix material history with sense data and the literary interpretative to arrive at conclusions that number crunching alone (at least at this stage of its development) could not do.

Such a procedure is hardly new: critics such as Karin Littau (2006) and Gillian Silverman (2012), inspired by feminist and queer attempts to render visible our blind spots, are telling us that reading is always an embodied experience (though the precise detail of what this means in the case of individual texts is sometimes lacking). Before them, Genette (1997) had mapped out a typology of the material paratexts and peritexts that help direct what, how, where and when communication takes place in print. And for centuries before Genette, typographers and publishers (and many authors) had been aware of the effects of the para and peri-textual. More generally, I was reminded of the political importance of bodily senses less by printers' manuals than by Kant's conceptualisation of the aesthetic in his *Critique of Judgement*. For Kant, 'aesthetics' referred to the feeling of delight experienced by the individual subject when contemplating an object. His idea of the aesthetic did not refer to the object at

all, but rather, in a philological return to the original Greek *aesthesis*, to sensations arising from a human encounter with an object. As Elizabeth Prettejohn reminded us a decade ago, «In a favourite example of Kant's, the statement «The rose I see before me is beautiful» is a judgement of taste, but the statement «roses in general are beautiful» is no longer purely aesthetic» (Prettejohn 2005, p. 41). Indeed, wrote Kant, «I must present the object immediately to my feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and that, too, without the aid of concepts» (Dutton 1911, para. 8). Such a definition of the aesthetic does not easily lend itself to systematisation by experts, for systematisation necessarily involves concepts rather than immediate sensation. Indeed, that «all judgements of taste are singular judgements» appropriate for individuals rather than groups was Kant's radical point: the appreciation of beauty was to be available to all and not governed by established rules that distinguished the refined aristocrats who had knowledge of them from the vulgar populace who did not. Whereas now the cultural power of the refined aristocrat has diminished, one can regard, if only in this sense, Digital Humanities specialists who promote as more real the specialised quantitative concepts and rules underlying their discipline as one of the latest aspirants to inherit their coronets. Perhaps a partial return to *aesthesis* may allow us to ask questions that the hypostatization of on/off signals can not.

Like many of her contemporaries, the nineteenth-century popular author Ouida (1839-1908) took up Kant's valorisation of individual *aesthesis* and its political implications: from the 1870s onwards, the democratization of aesthetic pleasure was one of her major platforms (King 2013). It is certainly legible in Ouida's most popular work, the 1871 short story that provides the case study for this article, «A Dog of Flanders». But that is less important to the point of this article than the contention that if we neglect how our perception of the material format of a text – our *aesthesis* – affects our understanding, we stand to risk being trapped, whether by the reification of computer code or by received ideas. «A Dog of Flanders» has uniformly been defined as a children's story by late twentieth-century critics and used as such by national institutions and transnational companies for their own purposes, yet I shall show how this labelling is a result of marketing decisions that arose in the 1890s and intensified in the early twentieth century. These marketing decisions affected the material format the story appeared in and thereafter the interpretative choices of critics and readers in general. I am, in other words, concerned to pollute both literary and book history through my own corporeal encounters with various material forms of a specific text. I am thereby seeking to exemplify, in an iterable, practical way, claims by critics whose return to the body can seem at times rather immaterial and generic, as well as suggest a kind of engagement with texts applicable by diverse laypeople in a variety of circumstances.

«A Dog of Flanders» was originally published in December 1871, in the Christmas number of volume 9 of the American *Lippincott's Magazine* (pp. 79-98). The issue was dated January 1872, a month after it appeared for sale, as was (and remains) normal. The story was, apparently, an «outstanding success» for the magazine (Tebbell 1969, p. 135). The story was then issued in January 1872 by Lippincott in a 50-cent collection of four Ouida tales from *Lippincott's* with two illustrations that was called *A Leaf in the Storm, and Other Stories*. In August of the same year the same collection – though the four tales were arranged in a different order – was issued for 5 shillings by Ouida's British publishers Chapman & Hall (*A Dog of Flanders and Other Stories*). In December 1872 the collection was brought out by Tauchnitz in Leipzig for his standard price of 2 francs (*A Leaf in the Storm; A Dog of Flanders; and other stories; Collection of British Authors*, number 1236) after an unauthorised version of the Lippincott collection had been printed by the Berlin publisher Asher over the summer.

Ouida's tale has been continuously in print since it first appeared. It has been translated into many languages, including Yiddish, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. WorldCat lists 102 editions, including duplicates, with, in addition, variant titles on «Nello» and «Patrasche». That WorldCat is incomplete is a given, though the extent of its omissions is hard to judge. For example, of three Italian editions I have handled (Ouida 1878, 1880, 1921), only one is mentioned by WorldCat, and in a 1929 reprint; numerous American editions I have either seen myself or identified are not included by WorldCat at all. The story has, furthermore, generated at least ten cinema and TV adaptations (Manzoli 2009; Volckaert 2010). There is even a computer game by Minoto Studios. Because of several anim  versions, the first and most famous dating from 1975 (Nippon Animation), the story is so well known in Japan that the city of Antwerp (which figures largely in the story) has been obliged to commission and install a statue of the two protagonists to give Japanese tourists something to look at when they visit. Toyota has donated a bench in front of Antwerp Cathedral (see Benelux Guide). The story has a Facebook page dedicated to it (Anon. 2008), and a rather arch documentary about the story's appeal in Japan was made in 2008 by Didier Volckaert and An van Dienderen, with an accompanying website (*Patrasche. A Dog Of Flanders*).

The story concerns an orphan boy, Nello, brought up by his poor but hard-working grandfather, Jehan Daas, in a hovel on the edge of an unnamed village near Antwerp in Flanders. The time is indeterminate but the conclusion could well be contemporary to the publication of the story. Daas earns his pittance by taking milk in a cart to market for wealthier neighbours. One day on the road, when Nello is a small boy, the pair encounter a dog who has been beaten almost to death. Nello wants to take it home and look after it, which he does. The dog recovers and is named Patrasche. He learns to drag the milk cart. Time passes. Nello reaches 16

years old and since Daas has become too old and ill to work, Nello takes the milk to market with the now aged Patrasche. Nello has taught himself to draw, inspired partly by the Rubens he is at times able to see in Antwerp churches and the cathedral. Nello has also befriended Alois, the daughter of his wealthy neighbour Baas Cogez. But Cogez, despite his wife's protestations, dislikes the boy simply because he is poor. A fire breaks out in Cogez's mill and he blames Nello as an excuse to prevent him seeing Alois. As a result of Cogez's accusations, his neighbours no longer give Nello work. Hope is not yet dead, however, for Nello has entered a drawing competition with a substantial prize. Winter comes. Destitute, Daas dies of cold and hunger; Nello and Patrasche are evicted the day before the competition result is declared. Nello does not win. Now desperate, he finds in the snow a bag of money with Baas Cogez's name on it. He takes it to Alois' house where he leaves it and begs Alois to keep Patrasche. He drags himself to see the Rubens in the Cathedral one last time, knowing that death is near. Cogez returns home in despair at having lost his money. Alois and her mother tell him who returned it to them and Cogez decides to fetch Nello in the morning and welcome him into his home. Meanwhile Patrasche escapes and traces Nello to the Cathedral. There the pair die of cold and hunger in the night. Cogez and others find them locked in an embrace the next morning. They are buried together.

As was completely normal, «A Dog of Flanders» was only reviewed when it came out in volume form. On the whole the collection in which it appeared was very well received: only the British *Pall Mall Gazette* seems to have demurred, disliking the whole collection for its lack of realism. Of «The Dog of Flanders» in particular it questions «whether Ouida does justice to Belgian philanthropy in supposing that there would not have been, at least, a Flemish woman or two to assist Patrasche in bringing back the good-looking boy to life» (Anon. 1872a). Much more typical was the review in the *Examiner* which regarded it as «one of the saddest and best tales that have appeared for many a day» and the entire volume as an instance of an author who has «found her soul... in illustrating the great problems of life» (Anon. 1872b). The *Penny Illustrated Paper* was equally impressed (Anon. 1872c). Of even more interest is an amusing scene that probably took place in the 1880s described in a letter from the artist Burne-Jones to the society hostess Lady Frances Horner:

I remember Ruskin and Cardinal Manning routing [= rooting] on their knees amongst some books to find 'The Dog of Flanders' which they loved; getting covered with dust and searching with enthusiasm. (Horner 1933, pp. 183-184)

Whether apocryphal or not, the anecdote illustrates the desire that a text can generate. Important for my purposes here, it stresses the physicality

of the text. Ruskin's and Manning's desire is not indicated in immaterial, general, mental or spiritual forms. Rather they are grubbing about for a specific material object on a dirty floor. But that should not lead us to suspect that the child-like delight they exhibit is simple or pure, or that the text they want is for children. Unlike Ruskin's prioritisation of «the innocence of the eye» – perception «without consciousness of what [things] signify» (Ruskin 1907, p. 304) – and unlike its predecessor Kantian 'disinterested' aesthetics of immediate sensation, words (and thereby concepts) have incited a desire for a material object. Like any fan's enthusiasm for a physical copy, Ruskin's and Manning's desire for «The Dog of Flanders» [*sic*] is necessarily impure, mixing the meanings they attributed to it and sensory perception. That the volume they were looking for was almost certainly the plain Chapman and Hall edition (Figure 1) may not suggest that we should attend to the physicality of the book, but it is perhaps that very plainness that enabled them to find the story interesting: though they might well have appreciated the editions shown below in Figures 12, 13 and 14, would they – or we – have felt the same for a story with covers like Figures 5, 6 or 8?

After the initial appearances of «A Dog of Flanders» in generic middle-class publications (*Lippincott's Magazine* and the plain volumes), two distinct target markets emerge, most clearly towards the end of the nineteenth century: the children's as the primary, and, as the secondary, the «art-book» designed more as a gift and for display rather than for reading. As a subset of the initial generic market, there was also a third target audience limited to the nineteenth century but revived by some recent critics, that reads the story as an animal-rights protest (see Mangum 2002 and 2007; Pollock 2005). While I shall deal with each of these, the first is perhaps the most surprising, for even though the story has been repeatedly defined as a children's story by academics (e.g. by Mangum 2002, p. 35; Tebbell 1969, p. 124; Schroeder, Holt 2008, p. 18; Tribunella 2010, p. 29), such a target readership is not obvious. Not only is righteousness not rewarded and the story bitterly pessimistic, but the erotic implications of the relations between the post-pubescent Nello and Alois are clear (and typical of Ouida) and the references to geography and art history are all decidedly aimed at educated adults. That it fits only with difficulty into the category «children's story» is illustrated by an engaging anecdote from American writer and academic Charlotte Zoë Walker. «A Dog of Flanders», she explains, inspired her to become a short story writer when she was a child simply because it was not the kind of story she was used to: she was in fact outraged by it. Hers is no doubt a response Ouida would have appreciated. Yet she too assumes that Nello is a «child» rather than a 16-year-old, hormone-raddled adolescent. It is worth quoting the passage at some length. Speaking of herself in the third person Walker writes:



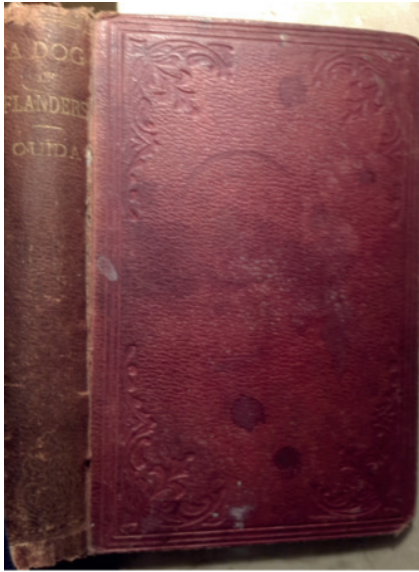


Figure 1. Chapman and Hall, New Edition, 1873

[...] it was the first story she ever read with a tragic ending. She was completely lost in the world of the boy and his dog, and the boy's passion for art, his longing to be a painter. Though there were no books about girls and their dogs in those days, she loved the dog especially - that brave and constant companion! She identified too with the boy's passion for art, his longing to be a painter. But what horror! - to come to the wintry end of the story and find them both dead of cold and hunger, in front of the painting by Rubens the outcast boy had struggled through freezing weather to see; cuddled together, yes - but dead! And no more words on the page to save them!

She wept with sadness and anger for her friends who had died at the end of the book.

It's only a story, her mother comforted. Don't worry, it's only a story, it's not real.

But why did they die in the story? The girl demanded.

Because that's the way the author wrote it, her mother said [...]

But what sort of author would kill a child and dog? Furious at the author of *A Dog of Flanders*, she made a promise to herself: When she grew up, she would be an author too, and she would not write stories whose endings were betrayals. She would not make children and dogs die, or readers cry. It was a sacred vow, a resolution. (Walker, 2005, p. 197)

The notion that «A Dog of Flanders» is a children's story dominates early twenty-first century thinking about it, from the computer game generated



by Minoto Studios in 2011 (see Figure 2) to the «official» versions presented on Belgium's limited edition 20 Euro coin (Figure 3) and the statue in Hoboken, Antwerp. In their different ways these are all based on what had long become the standard iconography on book covers for «A Dog of Flanders»: a pre-adolescent boy and a dog, clogs, baggy pants, tight jacket and cap, and a cart for the dog. They sum up and anchor its core meaning (cf. Figures 4, 5, and 6). One cannot imagine Manning or Ruskin taking a story seriously that was decorated like these.

On both book covers reproduced here (and Figures 5 and 6 are only two of very many similar) the weather is even fine and summery, the dog hardly straining with age at his task. The story seems as innocuous and joyful as the Minoto game, if aimed at an older pre-adolescent readership. The Jackie Coogan film from 1924 and its tie-in edition from Grosset and Dunlap (Figure 4) were unquestionably key in the solidification of this iconography, but the marketing of «A Dog of Flanders» as a 'safe' children's story goes back to the nineteenth century. It comprises two main aspects.

The first involved its definition as a story 'concerning children' – not adolescents – but not itself aimed at children. The first instance of this I have found dates from 1875 when it was packaged as the lead story by the editor Rossiter Johnson in volume 10 («Childhood») of his 18 volume «Little Classics» series. Included in the volume were eight other stories, the only ones likely to be recognised today being two stories published in 1850, Ruskin's «The King of the Golden River» which came second in the volume, and Dickens's «A Child's Dream of a Star» which concluded it. Now Johnson's series (despite its title) was not itself intended for children: «little» referred to the fact that each monthly volume was small in size and comprised short stories. Each cost a dollar and focussed on a single theme («Exile», «Intellect», «Tragedy», «Life», «Laughter», «Love», etc., and of course «Childhood»). Originally published by J.R. Osgood in Boston, the series sold very well indeed, and apparently proved that collections of short stories by diverse authors could indeed make a profit in the USA (Yost 1961; and see the paratextual information on the frontispiece to each volume).

In the same year of 1875 the second aspect, whereby «A Dog of Flanders» was marketed as a story about children 'for children', also appeared, if only temporarily: the Berlin publisher Engelmann printed it as the second of a four-part series of «English Contemporary Authors Tales, Travels, Plays, selected from Asher's collection of English Authors». It comprised a version (in English) of the story rendered suitable for «the upper classes of schools», based on the unauthorised edition by the Berlin publisher Asher. But apart from this, sustained marketing of the story for children really began in the 1890s in the United States. It is difficult to give a precise year as dates are not always given on the imprints. The earliest children's edition I can identify is through a review in the *Journal of Education* in November 1893 – perhaps it refers to a small format volume issued by



Figure 2. Splash screen of *A Dog of Flanders*,  
<http://mac.rash.jp/games/dasyutu/a160/en/>



Figure 3. 20 Euro coin

the New York publisher H.M. Caldwell, though this is not entirely clear. In 1898 the Boston Educational Publishing Company brought out a version «for use in schools» edited by Sara D. Jenkins. In 1902, Houghton Mifflin similarly brought out an annotated version as one of its «Riverside Literature» series, with a pronouncing guide and a brief introduction which unequivocally directed the story to children. Indeed, it combined «A Dog of Flanders» with another tale which Ouida had most definitely written for children, «The Nürnberg Stove», from her 1882 collection *Bimbi*. This hallucinogenic story of a little boy so in love with the beauty of a stove that he hides within it only to be discovered by King Ludwig II of Bavaria (who promptly rewards his love with training to be an artist), becomes a regular companion to «A Dog of Flanders» in editions of the first half of the twentieth century. It is as if publishers felt that the unhappy end of «A Dog of Flanders» needed to be neutralised where children were concerned. This attitude is clearly visible in the happy endings of the Hollywood film versions and in their associated press. They found it so unacceptable they had to rewrite it (see Figure 7; the 1924 Grosset and Dunlap film tie-in edition of the Ouida original in Figure 4 adds both «The Nürnberg Stove» and Ruskin's «The King of the Golden River»).

At the same time in the 1890s, «A Dog of Flanders» was being packaged anew specifically for adults. Chatto and Windus, who had bought Ouida's copyrights from Chapman and Hall in 1877, issued a two-shilling yellow-back in 1889 with a rather «strong» cover illustrating a scene from one of the original companion stories to «A Dog of Flanders», «A Branch of Lilac» (see Figure 8). The choice is interesting as already by this time «A Dog of Flanders» was being cited as supporting animal rights, and those of dogs in particular (e.g. Anon. 1883 and later e.g. Vera 1894). Ouida's outspoken engagement in animal rights certainly encouraged this (Ouida's numerous

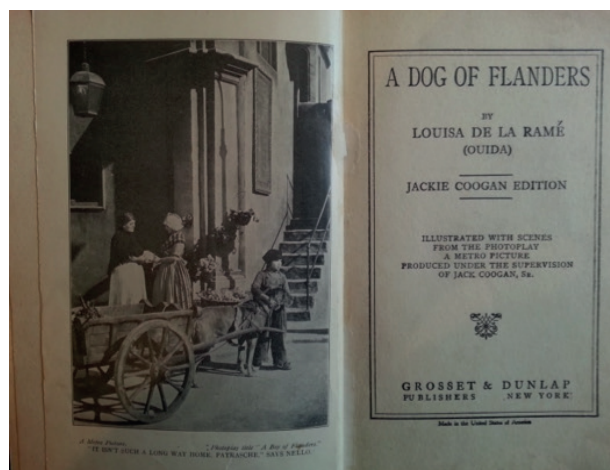


Figure 4. Grosset and Dunlap, 1924



Figure 5. Saalfield Publishing Co., New York, 1926



Figure 6. Rand MacNally, 1938



Figure 7. «Dell Movie Classic» no. 1088, Twentieth-Century Fox Film Corps, 1960



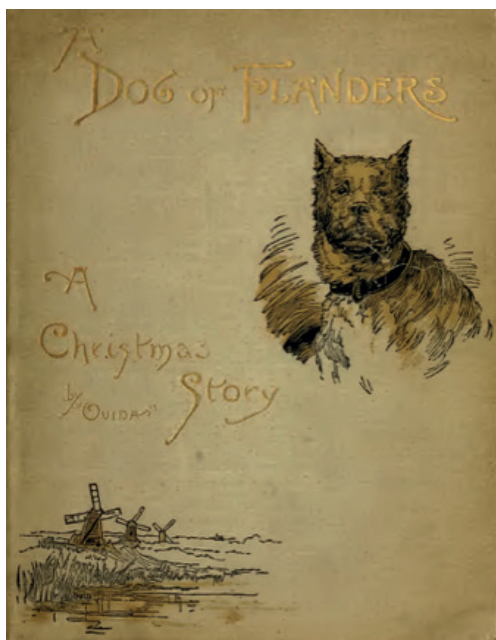


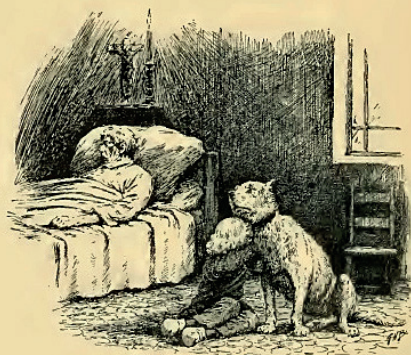
Figure 8. Chatto &amp; Windus, 1889

Figure 9. Nims and Knight 1891

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A DOG OF FLANDERS.

him passionately. He had passed away from them in his sleep, and when in the gray dawn they learned their bereavement, unutterable solitude and desolation seemed



to close around them. He had long been only a poor, feeble, paralyzed old man, who could not raise a hand in their defence, but he had loved them well: his smile had always welcomed their return. They mourned for him unceasingly, refus-

Figure 10. Nims and Knight 1891

letters on this topic to the *Times* and other newspapers are discussed by Anon. 1885). Yet Chatto and Windus seem to have decided that allusions to Ouida's risqué and violent novels from the 1860s – to which this might well have been a cover – were preferable to anything that could encourage animal rights purchasers. Given that Ouida's earlier works were selling twice as much as her later novels, such a decision is hardly surprising (on the comparative sales figures, see Jordan 2009, p. 63, note 63). Presumably the animal rights market was simply too small to be worth targeting.

Chatto and Windus's hold on the story in British territories is certainly why the new marketing for children appeared first in the USA, and it was again in America that «A Dog of Flanders» began to be sold as a gift book for adults. The first of these seems to have been issued for Christmas 1891 by Nims and Knight, a small publisher specialising in fine editions (and globes) that operated between 1882 and 1892, when the firm was bought out by the partner Joseph Knight. Exploiting photogravure, they issued illustrated editions of selected poems by Tennyson and Jean Ingelow, for example, and also beautiful items of local and specialist interest (e.g. *Fishing with the Fly*, «beautifully illustrated with colored plates of 149 Standard Salmon, Bass and Trout Flies», \$2.50, 1895 – see Anon. 1895). Their 112-page «A Dog of Flanders» is no exception to their aesthetic ambitions. An advert for «Fine Art Gift-Books by Nims and Knight», which gathers it with *Rocky Mountain Wild Flowers*, *Byron's Childe Harold*, *Robert Browning: Selections*, refers to it as «a new edition of a beautiful Christmas story, already prized as a classic by all who know it. With over forty original illustrations. Printed with great care on fine paper, and bound in dainty and original style. \$.1.50» (Anon. 1891). The *Publisher's Weekly* noted that «fine editions of authors we have loved all our lives» were again the vogue for Christmas 1892 and we must assume that the Nims and Knight edition was catering to a fashion that had been established for some years (see Figures 9 and 10).

It is hard not to connect the appearance of the Nims and Knight towards the end of 1891 with the American International Copyright Act which had come into force on 1 July that year. The Act effectively liberated texts which American publishers had distributed but not previously themselves typeset. Yet that connection would be misleading. The original version of «A Dog of Flanders» had been typeset by Lippincott in 1872 which gave the firm copyright in the USA for 28 years, i.e., until 1900. I have found, however, no record of Lippincott pursuing any kind of prosecution for copyright infringement for this text. Instead, Lippincott seems to have responded in 1893 with its own version of a gift book, a small quarto at the same price of \$1.50. Graced with a beautiful cover, it offered a better word-price ratio than the Nims and Knight since it included all four stories in the original collection with six new illustrations, each on a separate plate. More modest was the Samuel E. Cassino edition that came out

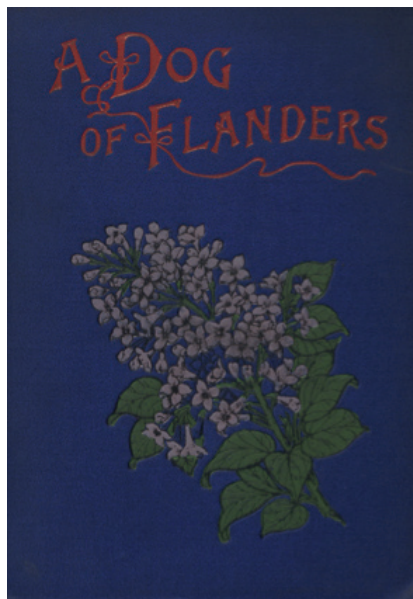


Figure 11. Chatto and Windus, 1893



Figure 12. Roycrofters, East Aurora, New York (1917)

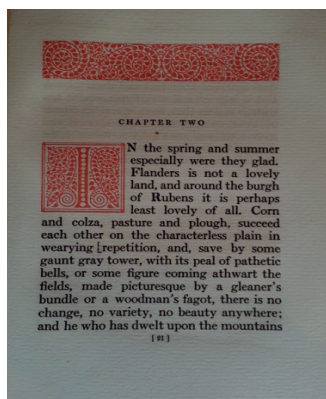


Figure 13. Roycrofters, East Aurora, New York (1917)

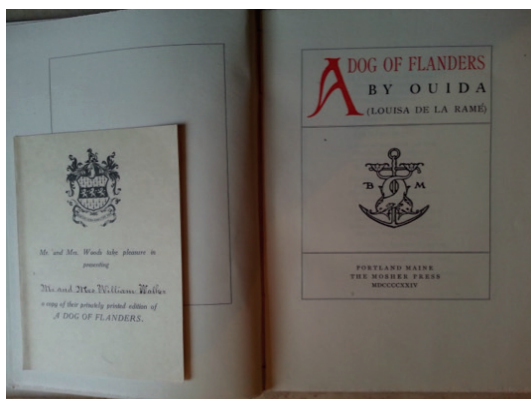


Figure 14. Mosher Press, Portland, Maine (1924)

again in 1893 in Boston, and issued simultaneously, with the exact same plates but a much daintier cover, by Donohue, Henneberry & Co in Chicago. This joint edition was a small octavo volume, the paper decidedly low grade, with 23 rather poor illustrations by Hiram P. Barnes which are at times clearly modelled on the Nims and Knight images but drawn and engraved with far less skill. Nonetheless, the cheap edition was still useful as a gift: an inscription in my copy of the Donohue shows it was given on St. Valentine's day in 1899. Unsurprisingly, in all the illustrations of all these volumes, Nello is depicted as unequivocally pre-adolescent and therefore 'safe'.

This is a marked contrast to Chatto and Windus's strategy when they too issued in 1893 a «dainty» octavo edition. This had a pretty branch of lilac on its cover which pointed, in a very different way, to the same story as on their earlier sensationalist yellowback, yet this time firmly directed towards women (see Figure 11). The volume kept the same illustrations as in the first Chapman and Hall edition in 1872: all that changed was the cover. This suggests that, alert to developments in the USA and fearful of imports, Chatto and Windus were determined to keep a strong hold on their copyrights in Britain and the Dominions by competing for the same new target market as their American rivals.

Despite the above, the labelling of «A Dog of Flanders» as a children's story was dominant by the early twentieth century. Yet the idea of its suitability as an adult gift book continued in isolated pockets, now imbued with Ruskinian ideas of how production method confers value. One of the earliest and finest of these adult editions was the 1917 hand-printed volume bound in tactile brown suede with green moiré silk endpapers, issued by the American followers of William Morris, the Roycrofters (see Figures 12 and 13). Another from 1924 was made in Portland Maine by the Mosher Press for a Mr. and Mrs. Woods specifically as a gift book to their friends (see Figure 14). My copy of this latter remains uncut: a clear sign of the volume's value as a gift rather than as something to be read. Even as late as 2005 the story was being published in New York by Starkey & Henricks as a luxurious limited-edition gift book.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this ramification of «A Dog of Flanders» into children's book and gift. First we note its flourishing in the twentieth century rather than in the nineteenth. Key of course is how copyright controlled paratext and thus the market segment and meanings assigned. While Chatto & Windus owned the intellectual property in the British territories, Lippincott's copyright would have ended in 1900. Even if isolated American editions occur in violation of that, it is after 1900 that the explosion of editions – above all directed at children – takes place in the USA. The animal rights understanding of the story that letters to newspapers had suggested in the nineteenth century seems a problem to publishers everywhere, as if it were an embarrassment that paratexts seek to deflect.



What this exploration of the material history of a text demonstrates very clearly is that the publishing market of 1890s and the twentieth century has contaminated our readings of that text to such a degree that we have taken those readings for granted. Yet how far is it possible to cleanse the text of these accretions, and, importantly, how desirable?

First let us consider how, if it were not a children's tale or gift book, readers might have understood «A Dog of Flanders» when it first appeared. Of course it was a Christmas story and to that extent we can expect it to reflect the gift-giving of the season (Dickens's «A Christmas Carol» is the obvious archetype where the gift is the self-reflexive lesson about generosity). It is obvious that publishers were keen to place at the root of both main marketing branches of «A Dog of Flanders» the idea of the gift, not least because in neither the adult version nor the children's is the intended reader identical to the purchaser. But what exactly is the purchaser giving the reader? In both cases it seems to be the gift of tears: an ethics of sympathy overcome by a cruel capitalism that feels guilty for its violence, a melancholy vision of romantic aspiration regretfully destroyed by social calculation and then incompletely mourned. The gift comprises, curiously, an adulthood that can have it all – both capitalist calculation and a romantic idealism. The latter is at the end locked in the past through the deaths of the protagonists, true, but that doesn't mean that it hasn't existed and been celebrated. This comfortable adult mourning for the dead ideal is no doubt one reason why Manning and Ruskin liked the story so much: neither of them were really outside the hegemonic while both were rebels against it. The dead ideal easily becomes a subject of discourse that, like a gift, can be passed between readers to consolidate their social links (Hyde 1983, esp. ch. 5). In this regard, the story falls perfectly within the unchallenging sentimental tradition.

Another pleasure the story offers lies in its obvious rhetorical skill. Besides plot-driven narrative, set-piece descriptions such as the following evoke fleeting sensory impressions and invite relaxed, unfocussed sensuousness.

In the spring and summer especially were they glad. Flanders is not a lovely land, and around the burgh of Rubens it is perhaps least lovely of all. Corn and colza, pasture and plough, succeed each other on the characterless plain in wearying repetition, and save by some gaunt gray tower, with its peal of pathetic bells, or some figure coming athwart the fields, made picturesque by a gleaner's bundle or a woodman's fagot, there is no change, no variety, no beauty anywhere; and he who has dwelt upon the mountains or amidst the forests feels oppressed as by imprisonment with the tedium and the endlessness of that vast and dreary level. But it is green and very fertile, and it has wide horizons that have a certain charm of their own even in their dullness and monotony; and

among the rushes by the water-side the flowers grow, and the trees rise tall and fresh where the barges glide with their great hulks black against the sun, and their little green barrels and varicoloured flags gay against the leaves. Anyway, there is greenery and breadth of space enough to be as good as beauty to a child and a dog; and these two asked no better, when their work was done, than to lie buried in the lush grasses on the side of the canal, and watch the cumbrous vessels drifting by and bring the crisp salt smell of the sea among the blossoming scents of the country summer. (Ouida 1872a, p. 83)

Here we are led from a dialectic concerning normative standards of beauty («Flanders is not a lovely land [...] But it is green and very fertile») to come to rest in what we are to understand, through focalisation, as the valorised aesthetic: basically a Kantian individual *aesthesis* («as good as beauty to a child and a dog»). Then again the very sound of the words conjures pleasure: agglutination of detail (there are no fewer than sixteen «and»), a proliferation of alternatives that both announce the inadequacy of language to capture beauty and stop the reader focussing too much on one detail, an abundance of alliteration, an elaborate patterning into pairs and threes (including a quite classical tricolon with anaphora), and an exquisite management of rhythm.

Yet descriptions such as these suggest not only the gift of Kantian disinterested pleasure. We can also read them as what Kant would have considered a 'dependent beauty' in which our response is influenced by considerations other than our individual reaction to it. For such gorgeous language is easy to interpret as a sign of poetic labour in the same way as the gorgeous details in, say, Alma-Tadema's or Millais' contemporary canvasses display the craftsmanship of their artists and therefore their value. Such emphasis on the sonic sensuousness and patterning of the communicative transaction between text and reader means that purchasers can rest assured they are giving a gift whose value is authenticated by signs of hard work.

The words of the story offer, then, a triple and very impure gift of tears, labour and *aesthesis*, a package which, in the gift books, is beribboned by the paratextual illustrations and covers. But the peritextual conditions the story originally appeared in, above all its relation to Ouida's other stories in *Lippincott's Magazine* of the time, suggest that we should be stimulated to protest rather than weep, value work, and halt in aesthetic enjoyment. Perhaps those who read the story as an animal rights protest were right. And yet there is something even more specific that the text is denouncing than the general treatment of dogs.

As I have already explained, «A Dog of Flanders» appeared in December 1871 and followed on immediately from «A Branch of Lilac», a two part tale that ran in October and November. «A Branch of Lilac» was

itself preceded by «A Provence Rose» in May and June, and by «A Leaf in the Storm» in February. Even though Ouida had had an agreement with Lippincott's since the mid-1860s, there are no previous stories by her in *Lippincott's Magazine*, and she was to publish no more there until «At Camaldoli» in 1883. «A Dog of Flanders» is thus the last of a clearly defined series. This helps establish its parameters of meaning for initial readers. When the Chapman and Hall edition of the four tales came out, for example, no reviewer noted anything other than unity: the *Examiner* even emphasised it, believing the unifying theme of the four stories was the «tone of bitter pain, a wail uttered over the apparent waste of all that is best in human feeling» (Anon. 1872b). All the preceding three tales are unequivocally adult: they break all the proprieties of children's stories with regard to violence and sex outside as well as within marriage in ways that no late Victorian or early twentieth-century publisher would have marketed to children. «A Branch of Lilac», for example, begins in a confrontational manner by linking the power to narrate with class-based patrilinearity:

You asked me my story. Why? To have a history is a luxury for the rich. What use can one be to the poor? If they tell it, who listens? And I have been very poor, always. Yet I was happy until that lilac blossomed one fair spring day.

I am a comedian. My mother was one before me. My father – oh, ta-ta-ta! That is another luxury for the wealthy. (Ouida 1871, p. 440)

All the first three tales also explicitly concern what *Lippincott's* in an article in July 1871 called «The Great War of 1870» (Scherer 1871) – the Prussian invasion of France in July 1870 and the ensuing Commune in Paris (to May 1871), events extensively reported by both the American and British newspapers (Knightley 2004, pp. 48-52). «A Leaf in the Storm» was so gory that Tauchnitz had asked Ouida if he could expurgate it, especially since it portrayed his fellow Prussians in so bad a light. Ouida refused. In a letter dated Florence 26 October 1872, she firmly allied herself to France, writing to Tauchnitz that «A Teuton like you and a Latin like me can never possibly view the war in the same light either in its causes or its effects» (Lee 1914, pp. 71-72). In its positive review, the radical *Reynolds's Newspaper* chose to quote precisely that passage of «A Leaf in the Storm» that Tauchnitz had asked to be removed (Anon. 1872e). In the context of both the American reception of the Franco-Prussian War (thoroughly mapped by Katz, 1998) and of the British, Ouida's was an oppositional stance: *Reynolds's Newspaper* was unusual in agreeing with her, as almost everyone else was on the side of the Prussians. It is not surprising then that Ouida might use all the weapons at her disposal, including destroyed aesthetic pleasure, to stimulate sympathy for the defeated.

When read as the climax of a polemical and topical series concerning the Prussian invasion of France and its effects, «A Dog of Flanders» assumes radically different meanings from anything suggested by paratexts and peritexts from later in the century and afterwards. Instead it becomes an angry political protest against Belgian self-interested inaction. For just as his neighbours, led by the bully Baas Cogez, refuse to help Nello, so Belgium had refused to intervene on behalf of its neighbour France in the face of what Ouida perceived to be the bullying Prussia. What Ouida presents as Belgium's glorious aesthetic past and its present failure to support artistic promise is used as stick to beat the country: Belgium, she is saying, is failing to live up to its past or its potential. The evident ethics of sympathy for the poor, the fetishisation of the artist and his perceptions, the valorisation of interspecies over human love, the specific denunciation of the maltreatment of Flemish dogs and even the gifts of tears and sensory pleasure are, in this reading, all put to work to denounce Belgian selfishness at a particular historical moment. Unconsciously for sure, the *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewer supported this notion when remarking the curious absence from the story of «Belgian philanthropy». But Belgian readers today are still very alert to such an interpretation, as suggested casually by an article in *Flanders Today*, where the story's lack of popularity in Belgium is attributed to its «social indictment» of the country (Anon. 2013).

That Ouida wanted us to read the story in this way is confirmed if one reads it alongside another of her texts from around the same time. Ouida had travelled to Belgium in the early autumn of 1871, visiting Antwerp and the Ardennes, Brussels and Spa, and her encounter with the paintings of the recently deceased Anton Wiertz resulted in an article in *London Society*, where she offered a portrait of Wiertz as «the ideal artist [... whose] life was consecrated to one passion, and that passion – Art» (Ouida 1872b, p. 24). She went on to detail how Belgian society had failed Wiertz so that he died in poverty and obscurity. At the end she made an interesting connection between the artist himself and Christ:

They say that when he lay there, lifeless, the peace refused to him throughout his arduous years came on him at the last; and that when the summer sunrise streamed through the ivy shadows of his casement in the glory of the morning, his face was as the face of his Christ – his Christ, who brake asunder the bonds of the grave and rose triumphant in the power of God. (Ouida, 1872b, p. 32)

It is easy to connect «A Dog of Flanders» with this. Nello, like Wiertz, is an artist from a very poor background, is self-taught and, when he comes to Antwerp, is «entranced and subjugated» by the Rubens altarpieces in the cathedral. Nello is a version of Wiertz, and, like him, to be understood as a type of Christ whose suffering not so much redeems us as in Chris-

tianity (Ouida was militantly atheistic), as makes us alert to injustice. In short, then, Charlotte Zoë Walker's fury on reading «A Dog of Flanders» was perfectly in accord with what Ouida wanted from her readers. It may too have been another reason that Ruskin and Manning liked it, for we know that Ruskin recommended a later protest novel of Ouida's, *A Village Commune*, for its scathing depiction of local politics in Italy (Ruskin 1883, p. 30). Such a political use of the sentimental was not new, but it becomes increasingly typical of Ouida from the 1870s onwards when she began to employ the sentimental to effect change in the arena of international politics, not just single-issue politics internal to a country such as we are more familiar with in Dickens, Gaskell and Beecher Stowe.

To research a text as I have done here is to demonstrate that, however much one uses the electronic as a tool (as I certainly have), without attention to our physical encounters with texts – with *aesthesis* – one risks automatically considering a text as 'intrinsically' a particular genre directed at a specific market. This was the basis of my question above on whether Cardinal Manning and Ruskin would have delighted in a story with covers such as those in Figures 5 and 6. As long ago as 1923 the noted American novelist, critic and photographer Carl Van Vechten observed that

some of the inhibitions of the world and its critics in regard to Ouida are due to the printings and bindings of her novels. In America, their most elaborate dress is the red or green volumes stamped with gold, issued by Lippincott in Philadelphia. The reprints of Chatto and Windus in London are even worse, bound in tomato red, and printed from carious plates in small letters. Indubitably, a new edition of Ouida, on good paper, handsomely printed and bound, with prefaces by some of her more illustrious admirers, would do much to dispel the current illusion that in reading Ouida one is descending to the depths of English literature. (van Vechten 1923, p. xx)

We who have more in common with Manning and Ruskin than with «Gene Dedolph» who so carefully wrote his name in a childish hand on my 1902 Houghton Mifflin child's edition – aren't we just as likely to be affected in our judgements by a text lent an aura by high-status paratextual apparatus, whether online or in paper form?

I am not claiming that the political interpretation of the text I offered above was somehow 'purer' or less polluted by history than those influenced by the marketing and paratexts of the last dozen decades that techniques derived from History of the Book assisted me to map. That is entirely to miss the point. Following Shklovsky and Derrida after him (Crawford 1984), I maintain rather that it is one of the duties of the humanities academic to render the text strange, to seek to alter perceptions so as to avoid the casual violence of routinized and automatic reaction to

an encounter. Automatic reactions create blind spots, and I follow those politically-engaged critics in trying to help us open our eyes to them. At the same time, there is no pure first text that we can access, however we might seek to wash our idea of a text clean from its afterlives. We need to recognise, as van Vechten did, that a text is, to our reading bodies, the ever increasing sum of the history of its sensuous presentation and perception. Neither is it and its myriad colleagues tidily and abstractly arrayed in the hermetically sealed terraria of our screens. However much Big Data and Digital Humanities promise a grander reality based on the systematisation of vast quantities of information, that reality remains a simulacrum only present in machine code. Unless that simulacrum is translated into policy and action (which it increasingly is), it is not the reality of our bodies. We must not pretend that thrusting ourselves into a screen is more real than our corporeal sensations, just as we must remain sceptical of the latest critic who thrusts texts into fashionable categories, or the book historian who unreflectingly reduces a text to the costs of its production and distribution. In all cases, theirs could be an automatic research that requires interrogation and thereby animation. We need, like Ruskin and Manning, to «search with enthusiasm» «routing around», «getting covered with dust», and, like van Vechten, Shklovsky and Derrida, to raise questions based on, and about, our always impure researches.

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## The Sacred in Pater's Aesthetic Ambivalences and Tensions

Maria Luisa De Rinaldis  
(Università del Salento, Italia)

**Abstract** Walter Pater's aesthetic is shaped by the tension between the spiritual and the material, the pure and the impure. While his contemporaries appreciate the purity of his art, it should be understood that concerns with the material impure also inform, among other works, the two narratives *Denys l'Auxerrois* and *Gaudioso, the Second*. This analysis shows how Pater's dual aesthetic affects his understanding of the category of the sacred, in line with contemporary anthropological thought. The representations of Denys, a modern embodiment of the Greek god Dionysus, and of Gaudioso the saint subvert dominant ideologies of productivity and progress, suggesting a renewed experience of the sacred. The aesthetic and the sacred are thus positioned as interlinked spaces for the expression of the repressed and the displaced, while Pater's sense of the sacred is significantly re-oriented towards the human.

**Keywords** Anthropology. Impure. Sacred. Walter Pater.

In *Greek Studies*, Walter Pater discusses the «falsifying isolation» of Greek sculpture in modern galleries, which has led us to consider sculptures «as embodiments, in a sort of petrified language, of pure thoughts [rather] than as elements of a sequence in the material order» (Pater 1910b, pp. 188-189). Pater's approach, which places sculpture firmly in the sphere of the material, has a specific value in relation to the sacred that these pages will seek to elucidate.

The unresolved tension between the spiritual and the material, the pure and the impure, is a key element of Paterian aesthetics. Purity was an issue in responses to Pater in his own day, as reviews of his work in contemporary journals and criticism reveal. George Moore ranked Pater among the highest echelons of literary criticism, together with Algernon C. Swinburne and John Addington Symonds, for whom literary criticism was an art. They were ranked more highly than drama critics, since playwriting was considered to be more of a commercial trade (Moore 1891). There is undoubtedly

a prestigious and élitist aura surrounding Pater and his colleagues.<sup>1</sup> To give an example we may cite Oscar Wilde's review of *Appreciations*, the collection of essays Pater published in 1889. Wilde's text foreshadows his later view of the critic and of criticism itself, as expounded in «The Critic as Artist»,<sup>2</sup> especially when he argues: «the true critic is he who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure» (in Seiler 1980, p. 234). Pater's modernity is defined in terms of this inclusiveness, which is also reflected in the style of his essays, «some of them being almost Greek in their purity of outline and perfection of form, others medieval in their strangeness of colour and passionate suggestion» (p. 234). Wilde notes Pater's engagement with polarities with reference to contradiction and paradox: he describes the subject of Pater's essay *Style* first as too abstract and subsequently as «very real», since «behind the perfection of a man's style, must lie the passion of a man's soul» (p. 234). But the critic is unambiguous when he praises the purity of Pater's art, his «noble realization of things nobly conceived» and the perfection of his inimitable art (pp. 234, 236).

Similarly, Selwyn Image saw Pater as working between substance and mystery, communication and «'incommunicable' ability»; in reference to *Imaginary Portraits*, again in the appreciative tradition of the period, he stressed the first-rate quality of Pater's writing (pp. 182-183). In a note in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the second edition of *The Renaissance*, Pater's language was defined as «carefully pure» (Anon. 1877, p. 13).

The idea of purity is stressed again in the first Italian translation of *The Renaissance*, published by Aldo De Rinaldis in 1912. De Rinaldis was an art critic who shared Benedetto Croce's neo-idealistic critical stance. The insistence on the notion of purity in art is evident in the selection of the lexical dominion of purity in the following two examples: the adverb in the sentence «Few artists work quite cleanly» (Pater 1893, p. xii) is translated with «con purezza» (Pater 1912, p. 5). Moreover, De Rinaldis adds the adjective «pura» to the translation of the well-known statement asserting the principle of art for art's sake in the work's *Conclusion*: «To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame [...] is success in life» (Pater 1893, p. 251) is rendered «Arder sempre con questa forte fiamma pura come una gemma [...] è il successo nella vita» (Pater 1912, p. 254; De Rinaldis 2013).

Purity was also an intrinsic theme in Pater's texts, for example in the

1 Pater was, however, criticised by Mrs. Oliphant precisely «for the 'abstract superiority', 'ultra-culture' and 'High Intellectualism'» associated with his privileged university life at Oxford (Court 1980, p. 20).

2 This essay, published in the collection *Intentions* (1891), is the revised version of «The True Function and Value of Criticism» which had already appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* (July and September 1890).

essay «Diaphaneité» (1864), where he promotes his version of the ideal character. The «burning point» of our moral nature, he argues, is combined with evanescence, shades of light (Pater 1917, p. 248). The saint and the artist constitute two «unworldly types of character», yet they remain engaged with the world. However there is also a third type which intersects the world while keeping its distance from it, embodying a «colourless, unclassified purity of life» (pp. 247-248). This type, which is never overtly described as embodying the 'diaphaneité' of the essay's title, is the fulfilment of intellect and culture «assumed by a happy instinct» (p. 250). Perfection, and thus purity, is achieved by reducing the barriers between outer and inner life, between the external (or factual) and the internal (or spiritual). This nature is simply given, and its intellectual power is latent within it, «like the reminiscence of a forgotten culture» (p. 250). It naturally incorporates past wisdom and layers of history, as it is «like a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere» (p. 251). It is moreover life-giving and associated with change. Whereas our collective life is colourless and uninteresting, and we live as if neutralised, this crystal nature is, in contrast, heroic and sacrificial, restoring harmony. The essay concludes by focusing on ideas of social crisis, wounds and suffering, but only to insist on the fact that the violence inherent in any process of regeneration is softened by the diaphanous type.<sup>3</sup>

The aesthetic of detachment embodied in the notion of 'diaphaneité' is also expressed in the essay «Aesthetic Poetry», where the spiritual is read in relation to the material. While on the one hand aesthetic poetry is placed in the realm of the ideal, on the other hand Pater's discussion of William Morris's medievalism shows the links between refined idealism and the dangerous world of the senses (Pater 1889, pp. 213-218).

Pater's concerns with material reality also shape his reflections in *Style*, as we are reminded of the «physiognomy» of words, of «the colour, the physical elements or particles in words like *absorb*, *consider*, *extract*», of the «elementary particles of language» (p. 17). Evolutionist thought had impacted on the ways of seeing reality and on the discourses surrounding it, and the material had already been absorbed within spiritualistic stances in the works of the Pre-Raphaelites. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the poetics of the spiritual had even become sensuous medievalism (Praz 1988, p. 194). Pater himself noted, in his essay on Rossetti, that he «knows no region of spirit which shall not be sensuous also, or material» (Pater 1889, p. 236). Moreover, the material is perceived as impure; with reference to Dante Alighieri, Pater argues that «if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material loses its earthiness and impurity» (p. 236).

3 For a discussion of «Diaphaneité», see Varty (1991).

The duality of this aesthetic informs Pater's narratives of pagan divinities, sacred Madonnas, and other characters associated with religion and sanctity. The following discussion of the imaginary portraits of *Denys l'Auxerrois* and *Gaudioso, the Second* will seek to understand how this duality affects the category and significance of the sacred itself.<sup>4</sup> In *Denys l'Auxerrois*, one of Pater's imaginary portraits published in 1887, a «relic from a classical age» takes the shape of a new Dionysus, a medieval embodiment of the Greek god produced by the narrator's fantasy.<sup>5</sup> The juxtaposition of the classical and the medieval, of paganism and Christianity, here confirms Pater's fondness for ambivalence, which is encoded in his aesthetics.

In the French town of Auxerre, one rainy afternoon, the narrator browses a shop selling *bric-à-brac*, where he finds a fragment of painted glass representing «a figure not exactly conformable to any recognised ecclesiastical type» (Pater 1910a, p. 52). To decipher the type, he goes to see a priest who possesses a complete series of tapestries representing the same subject as the image on the glass. Seized by «a mad vehemence», the figure, an organ-builder, reappears in the tapestries in various forms, «a flaxen and flowery creature, sometimes wellnigh naked among the vine-leaves, sometimes muffled in skins against the cold, sometimes in the dress of a monk» (p. 54). The multifaceted character reveals suffering and beauty, the pagan beauty of a god who shares the melancholy of a later age. From these visual hints the story of *Denys l'Auxerrois* «shaped itself at last» (p. 54).

The subversive function of the character is explicit from the very beginning, as *Denys* is associated with a period of political revolution in Auxerre, the shift from a feudal to a «free communistic life» (p. 55). The change is interpreted as a return to past splendour, a re-enactment of a golden age, yet far from pure, as seen in the description of an old flask found in an unearched Greek coffin, which is presented as an object of beauty in the midst of decay:

Within the coffin lay an object of a fresh and brilliant clearness among the ashes of the dead – a flask of lively green glass, like a great emerald. It might have been «the wondrous vessel of the Grail». Only, this object seemed to bring back no ineffable purity, but rather the riotous and earthy heat of old paganism itself. (p. 56)

4 On Pater and the imaginary portrait, see Lambert-Charbonnier (2004); Bizzotto (2001); Bini (1992).

5 On Pater's use of Greek mythology, see, among others, Cowan (2014); De Rinaldis (2010); Evangelista (2009); Bizzotto (2000); Connor (1983).



The adjectives «fresh», «brilliant», «lively» and «green» express vitality, in stark contrast with the sense of death surrounding the place: a vitality which eschews purity to embrace fire and earth. The reference to the Holy Grail also recalls the cycle of sacrifice and regeneration. The «new beauty» (p. 57) that has arisen in Auxerre has its centre in Denys, whose destiny is one of marginality and destruction.

At the very beginning of the narrator's story, Denys's central role is marked by his first appearance in the church on Easter Day, a crucial date for Christians, during the priests' traditional ball game. The location is itself another sign of the character's centrality, as the game takes place «in the very centre of the great church» (p. 57). After being referred to as «the figure» (p. 54) and «the singular being» (p. 57), the character is now identified with a name, «Denys – Denys l'Auxerrois, as he was afterwards called» (p. 58), which clearly expresses the sense of belonging to that community. The power he has over the people around him is immediately evident. As he makes «the thing really a game», the solemnity and «the decorum of an ecclesiastical ceremony» are shattered and people start to play not simply to perform but to amuse themselves:

The boys played like boys, the men almost like madmen, and all with a delightful glee which became contagious, first in the clerical body, and then among the spectators. (p. 58)

Old age is almost discarded and women feel attracted to Denys when they see him at his fruit stall in the market. His capacity to attract is, however, presented from the start as being suspect: «The men [...] suspected – who could tell what kind of powers? hidden under the white veil of that youthful form; and pausing to ponder the matter, found themselves also fallen into the snare» (p. 60).

Denys thus becomes a mystery one needs to understand, his charm a secret one wants to reveal. He represents a strong focus of attention which detracts from the whole religious scene. Clerics and monks serve to bring him to centre stage, to protect and keep him alive. He erupts as a disturbing presence which produces disorder in well-established systems. Victorian disenchantment with religious beliefs had already opened up new ideological spaces for encoding meanings. Giving further expression to anxieties arising from the loss of contact with religion, Pater's reading of the Dionysian suggests a renegotiation of contemporary notions of the sacred.

Since the 1860s, anthropology had been shifting towards an investigation of the primitive in classical culture. In his *History of Ancient Greek Literature* (1897), Gilbert Murray expresses a change in the perception of the Greek ideal:

The «serene and classical» Greek of Winckelmann and Goethe did good service to the world, in his day, though we now feel him to be mainly a phantom. [...] There is more flesh and blood in the Greek of the anthropologists, the foster-brother of Kaffirs and Hairy Ainos. He is at least human and simple and emotional, and free from irrelevant trappings. His fault, of course, is that he is not the man we want, but only the raw material out of which that man was formed: a Hellene without the beauty, without the spiritual life, without the Hellenism. (Murray in Bertelli 2005, p. 116)

In 1889 the Scottish scholar William Robertson Smith (the founder, together with E.B. Taylor and J.G. Frazer, of British scientific anthropology) published in London his influential study *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, which undermined nineteenth-century assumptions about the 'purity' of sacredness. He affirmed that, in contrast to usage in his own time, the word «holy» was not an ethical concept in ancient religion:

While it is not easy to fix the exact idea of holiness in ancient Semitic religion, it is quite certain it has nothing to do with morality and purity of life. Holy persons were such, not in virtue of their character but in virtue of their race, function or mere material consecration. And at the Caananite shrines the name of «holy» [...] was specially appropriated to a class of degraded wretches, devoted to the most shameful practices of a corrupt religion, whose lives, apart from its connection with the sanctuary, would have been disgraceful even from the standpoint of heathenism. (Smith 1889, pp. 132-133)

Sacred things are prohibited for human use, or they are things that can be used only under certain rules and restrictions. This idea of separateness, which concerns the inviolability of all that pertains to the gods and their worship, is embodied in the concept of taboo. However, alongside taboos that reflect rules of holiness, there is another kind of taboo which, for the Semites, relates to rules of uncleanness: «Women after child-birth, men who have touched a dead body and so forth are temporarily *taboo* and separated from human society, just as the same persons are unclean in Semitic religion» (p. 142). The 'taboo' person is associated with a somehow supernatural and hostile power (p. 143). The confluence of holiness and uncleanness in the structure of the taboo is again highlighted by Robertson Smith in an additional note to *Lectures* entitled *Holiness, Uncleanness and Taboo*, which states that «the two are in their origin indistinguishable» (p. 427) as «[t]he acts that cause uncleanness are exactly the same which among savage nations place a man under taboo, and [...] these acts are often involuntary, and often innocent, or even necessary to society» (p. 427). As uncleanness is contagious, it has to be controlled or even

physically eliminated, which is what the ban is for. Robertson Smith's approach encompassed sacramental theories of sacrifice and influenced the group of scholars known as the Cambridge Ritualists.<sup>6</sup>

About a decade later, in 1911, W. Warde Fowler published the essay «On the original meaning of the word *sacer*», which further asserted the ambivalence of the notion. Fowler discusses the figure of the *homo sacer* in Roman religious law, first recorded by Sextus Pompeius Festus and also referred to by Macrobius (Agamben 1995, p. 79).<sup>7</sup> A man who transgresses and challenges the alliance between god and the community is abandoned to the gods he has offended and loses both human and divine protection. Fowler writes: «*Sacer esto* is in fact a curse; and the *homo sacer* on whom this curse falls is an outcast, a banned man, tabooed, dangerous» (Fowler 1920, p. 17). As a result, the transgressor can be killed without this being considered a murder. Fowler then stresses the ambiguity inherent in the condition of being *sacer*, referring to Robertson Smith's discussion of the meaning of the verb 'to ban' which in the Old Testament is sometimes rendered as 'to consecrate'. Stressing similarity with forms of *devotio*, Fowler adds that «*sacer* must [...] be translated not 'sacred to' but 'accursed and devoted to'» (p. 21).

As Giorgio Agamben noted in his seminal study *Homo Sacer* (1995), the ambivalence of the sacred first established by Robertson Smith was to acquire more cogent theoretical form in Sigmund Freud's studies of totemism and taboo, and it also subsequently permeated twentieth-century linguistics (see Emile Benveniste's *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*).

Pater's fantasy of a modern Dionysus surely reflects and projects confluences of the impure in the domain of sacredness, as he himself was working within a dualistic and ambivalent approach to antiquity and to the sacred, in line with contemporary anthropological research. Indeed, in *Denys l'Auxerrois*, the character of Denys shows his negative side in the second part of the narrative: «For in truth Denys at his stall was turning the grave, slow movement of politic heads into a wild social license, which for a while made life like a stage-play» (Pater 1910a, p. 61). The change is temporary, but its transitory nature is precisely what is required for it to happen, as Denys embodies the principle of continuous transformation and the cycle of death and rebirth. Red is the colour of «the new spirit» (p. 61): people «took fire» and «hot nights were noisy with swarming troops of dishevelled women and youths with red-stained limbs and

6 I am indebted to Giuliana Scalera for discussion of these anthropological issues, particularly in relation to the myth of Dionysus.

7 I would like to thank Aglaia McClintock for her interesting reflections on the significance of this form of punishment in Roman law.

faces», the planet Mars was «hanging in the low sky like a fiery red lamp» (p. 61). Denys is leading people towards an idle, non-structured natural life, a process in which nature itself is playing a role, as various natural phenomena testify. His going against or being disrespectful of social codes and accepted behaviour is a deviation which very soon turns against him. The movement towards impurity starts when he «taught people not to be afraid of the strange, ugly creatures which the light of the moving torches drew from their hiding-places» (pp. 62-63). Denys's dark side is animal-like: he tames a wolf,<sup>8</sup> is haunted by an owl and does not fear lions. Moreover, while playing the role of the God of Wine in a pageant, he wears an elephant-scalp. But his biggest transformation into savagery takes place when, having lived off spring water and fruit all his life, he starts to ask for and eat raw meat, «tearing the hot, red morsels with his delicate fingers in a kind of wild greed» (pp. 64-65).

Yet he still exerts great fascination and attracts artists who are taught «an art supplementary to their own, that gay magic, namely (art or trick) of his existence» (p. 65). As a reproduction of Dionysus, Denys is «like a double creature, of two natures, difficult or impossible to harmonise» (p. 66). His golden side fades away and corruption seeps in: people degenerate, opting for a carnivorous diet, and horrible crimes are committed; women are accused of drowning their babies, a girl of committing suicide and Denys himself of being a murderer. Going back to a glorious mythical past thus seems to be only an illusion, as the fascination ascribed to Denys himself is now attributed to witchcraft. This downward spiral is confirmed by the association of Denys/Dionysus with hell. The final image of this unstable figure is one of abasement and suffering. The character is tabooed, as his powers appear to be those of a sorcerer, and he has to hide from those who want to kill him. The sense of ruin infects the landscape and the community as well. An act of violence against Denys could restore the previous state of things, but he is able to escape and find refuge in his old house. Living in a Hobbesian state between the human and the animal, the banished Denys, now a sort of *homo sacer*, experiences a relationship of inclusion and exclusion, a stranger, abandoned and excluded, but also free.

Through a strange inversion at this point, contact with what is material and impure is associated with regeneration. The clergy hope to find a remedy for social dissolution in the exhumation of the corpse of one of the patron saints. Sacred relics have the function of compensating for the unholy, but there is little sense of sacredness in Pater's narrative of their being unearthed:

8 English law under Edward the Confessor referred to a bandit as a wulfesheud, a wolf's head (Agamben 1995, p. 117).

The search for the Saint himself continued in vain all day and far into the night. At last from a little narrow chest, into which the remains had been almost crushed together, the bishop's red-gloved hands drew the dwindled body, shrunken inconceivably, but still with every feature of the face traceable in a sudden oblique ray of ghastly dawn. (p. 69)

Rather than curing Denys, this «shocking sight» seems to contaminate him with the very quality of death, as he devotes himself to «gloomy objects» and puts on «a ghastly shred from the common bones» (p. 69). Silent and melancholy, he is hosted by the monks in a cloister, and there, as if by mere unconscious acts, he creates new artistic fashions and ways of expression, which are associated with a different kind of sacredness: «It was as if the old pagan world had been *blessed* in some way» and Ovid's «old loves and sorrows seemed to come to life again in medieval costume» (p. 71). A different sacred music is sought after, one that is more inclusive and varied. A patron of the arts and of music in particular, Denys is now able to write his own story by building the first organ, an experience which «became like the book of his life: it expanded to the full compass of his nature, in its sorrow and delight» (p. 72). However, his «unmistakably new» music seems to be that of a madman (p. 72), reflecting certain negative views of music that were expressed in the Renaissance. For example, in his *Discorso sopra la musica* (1581), the Italian Francesco Bocchi described music as a vain pastime of the nobility, responsible for the decline of Italy. Denys's new music is no «innocuous pastime» (Gerbino 2014, p. 224), as it is disturbing and challenging.

The story of Denys is one of presence and disappearance, visibility and escape, memory and forgetfulness. During another public occasion for the blessing of the foundations of a new bridge built over an ancient Roman one, the disturbing presence of the old pagan world induces the community to expose the skeleton of a child so as to guarantee the safety of those passing over the bridge. In sight of onlookers, Denys flings himself into the water, but although many suppose him to be dead, he continues to work on his organ in the cloister. In his melancholy fits, «he would dig eagerly [...] digging, by choice, graves for the dead in the various churchyards of the town» (Pater 1910a, p. 74). The contradiction between his being outside the communal sphere and yet part of it is unresolved. His condition is an exceptional one:<sup>9</sup> mobile and beyond fixity, he constantly hovers between the holy and the unholy. He places himself on this boundary when he decides to exhume his mother's body, buried in unconsecrated ground, and to put it in the consecrated area of the cloister. The unresolved fracture is

9 Exceptionality is a category discussed by Agamben in relation to the *homo sacer* (Agamben 1995, pp. 90-95).

eventually exposed in the final public scene which dramatises his destruction. After a religious ceremony during which he performs on the organ, he once again becomes involved in acting, this time performing the figure of Winter hunted through the streets. While in the beginning Denys had transformed the ball game in the cathedral into something that was «really a game», now the situation is reversed, as the play, or rather the acting, comes true. While mechanically playing his role, Denys prompts the mad reaction of the community: «The pretended hunting of the unholy creature became a real one, which brought out, in rapid increase, men's evil passions» (p. 76). His body is torn into pieces and «[t]he men stuck little shreds of his flesh, or failing that, of his torn raiment, into their caps; the women lending their long hairpins for the purpose»; his soul, however, «was already at rest» (p. 76), and as a further sign of his dual nature his heart is found still intact and placed under a stone marked with a cross in a dark corner of the cathedral. Both holy (as the embodiment of a pagan God) and unholy, the sacrificed creature is thus consigned to a sacred place, and once more the sense of displacement and ambivalence is strong.

In dealing with the Dionysian, Pater aligns himself with Nietzsche's revaluation of vitalism, thus producing a sort of modern sacralization of the impure. The Paterian rewriting of the myth of Dionysus can also be read in the light of Georges Bataille's formulation of the modern experience of sacrifice. Further exploring the ambivalent sacred as codified in Robertson Smith, Bataille (1967) highlights the fact that societies are centred on production, rational consumption and conservation. These structures of social organization tend to preclude significant forms of waste (*dépense*), of non-productive behaviour, which put us in touch with our deeper emotions and hence with the sacred. Loss is exactly what gives this waste significance. Loss and destruction without compensation are, moreover, crucial to the idea of religious sacrifice, which is the process through which sacred things are produced. Bataille argues that today the experience of *dépense* has all but disappeared, as there is no acceptance of whatever is generous, unmeasured and orgiastic. However when systems are forced into crisis through the experience of uncompensated loss, man ceases to be isolated in the splendour of material things. Indeed, Bataille argues that the main redeeming feature of systems is precisely their vulnerability to crisis, something which allows access to the unsubordinated *dépense*.

Many examples can be found in Pater's works of systemic uncertainties and fractures, leading to contamination and impurity. The emphasis on loss in the sacrificial figure of Denys l'Auxerrois clearly shows that Pater proposes categories which are alternative to the dominant materialistic values of the Victorian period. Production was central in a society that was forming its own ideology of progress, but the Paterian images of dispersal and of the impure body express the distortions and inversions upon which this ideology was constructed as well as the need for a renewed experience of sacredness.

*Gaudioso, the Second*, an unfinished imaginary portrait written in the 1890s, is another Paterian example of a deviant image. Gerald M. Monsman has argued that the aesthetic hero proposed by Pater in this text should be read in relation to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The critical literature on the Paterian fragment analysed here is rather limited, and a number of recent publications on Pater do not even mention *Gaudioso*. This neglect is perhaps due to the fact that it was published, by Monsman, only in 2008. Monsman's thesis is that Pater noted a loss of «moral sense» in *Dorian Gray*, while he found an «ethical motive» in Plato's works (Monsman 2008, p. 97). Pater published *Plato and Platonism* in 1893, having previously created aesthetic and ethical heroes such as Gaudioso, Gaston de Latour and Marius the Epicurean. Monsman, however, stresses the fact that Pater did not complete either *Gaudioso* or *Gaston* but did finish his book on Plato, since, he suggests, the Greek philosopher offered a «safer aesthetic hero», and one less comparable to Wilde's characters (p. 97).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Gaudioso the saint wrestles with a counter identity, which again reveals an interplay between differing systems, and an instability of significance. As Pater had stated in his preliminary notes on the work in «Art Notes in North Italy», Gaudioso embodies a fascinating combination of humanity and holiness:

The eloquent eyes are open upon some glorious vision. [...] Beauty and Holiness had «kissed each other», [...]. Here at least, by the skill of Romanino's hand, the obscure martyr of the crypts shines as a saint of the later Renaissance, with a sanctity of which the elegant world itself would hardly escape the fascination [...]. (Pater 1917, pp. 107-108)

The narrative originates from the portrait of Saint Gaudioso I, a work by the painter Girolamo Romanino (c.1484-c.1560) dated to about 1524. The figure on the canvas is, however, that of a second Gaudioso, whose name, before entering the Church, was Domenico Averoldi: «The good looks of Domenico Averoldi, under the title of Gaudioso the Second, Bishop of Brescia, who in Romanino's picture represents, with so deep an impress of sanctity, Gaudioso the First, Bishop and Saint, were in truth hereditary in his family» (Pater in Monsman 2008, p. 88).<sup>11</sup> The identity of the saint is falsified, and that of the sitter is somewhat dubious too, though he was perhaps «some distinguished churchman of Romanino's own day», as Pater reports (Pater 1917, p. 107). Indeed, an artist could paint a portrait even if he did not know what the person looked like, by presenting just an idea of his/her appearance or «by using a model of his own time». This practice

<sup>10</sup> On Pater's Platonism see Lee (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Manuscript copy at the Houghton Library, Harvard, MS Eng 1150 (8).



created a blend of sacred and profane and was a subject of much debate in Renaissance Italy (Lambert-Charbonnier 2002, p. 208).

The name Gaudioso itself is ambivalent, ironically suggesting worldly pleasure, but in fact Gaudioso's life alternated between religious and worldly ambition. On a different level this oscillation is also accentuated by the ambiguity of the genre of Pater's narrative itself, poised between the real and the imaginary. Dwelling from the beginning in the realm of beauty within the family line, Gaudioso is presented at first as the subject of an inanimate painting; a series of inanimate grammatical subjects is used to build up the discourse: «The good looks», «the family portrait gallery», «it had brought» (i.e., «that masculine charm»), «the masterful eyes», «Eloquent eyes», «The expression of high birth», «It is as if the facial apparatus» (Pater in Monsman 2008, p. 89). The effect is one of neutrality and distance. His beauty is composed and exempt of pathos:

Eloquent eyes, of the poetic rather than the philosophic temper, they are not searching for anything: – have something to tell rather. And one could hardly conceive a frown between them. The expression of high birth and breeding is due chiefly to an air of harmonious composure in the lines. It is as if the facial apparatus for any painful or mean irritation were non-existent there. (p. 89)

The world of beauty Gaudioso belongs to is one of harmony, and of the absence of pain or negative emotion. This same world is associated with non-existence. Yet, the remoteness associated with the aesthetic dimension Gaudioso embodies is reversed in the course of the narration as we witness a shift from art to nature, from the painting to the living creature:

[...] the lad of eighteen, already, seemingly, in some respects, its creature, had felt something rise in his throat, as certain words [...] floated all at once into his memory: *Manus tuae fecerunt me!* – «My Maker, Thy hands have made me and fashioned me»: and again, «'Tis Thou, hast fashioned me behind and before, Most excellent Artist! And laid Thine hand upon me!». <sup>12</sup> (p. 89)

The character is from now onwards referred to with personal pronouns: «A quaint story he never denied was sometimes told in his presence», «His friends indeed had destined him», «Had he made himself a diplomatist» (p. 89), «he figured as a brilliant young man of the world», «he met a young lady», «he turned once and for all to the clerical profession» (p. 90). Initially something of a dandy, having renounced his religious vocation for

12 Pater is here quoting the *Psalms*. See Monsman (2008, p. 98, n. 8).

the love of a young lady, when he is ready to embrace a religious life again, he needs testing. Gaudioso is thus assigned a task of a very unworldly kind, that is to exhume dead bodies and bones and bury them again after re-writing their inscriptions:

Behold him, then, submissively at work, day by day, in mouldering osuaries, charnel-houses, and such places, in those many dark crypts of the old Brescian churches, crypt below crypt. (p. 91)

The aesthetic detachment initially suggested by the figure in the portrait gives way to a world of action and involvement.<sup>13</sup> The shift is signalled on the linguistic level through an inversion in perspective and gaze. Gaudioso's eyes were an instrument of worldly pleasure, very much emphasised in the first part of the story, but after his conversion, he is the one being looked at. From an emphasis on eyes as if they were autonomous agents, the text shifts to a transitive mode that makes the character the object of sight. He is now surrounded by the material impure, as his «dainty fingers grew used to the touch of those rotting discoloured bones» (p. 91). He is forced to accept familiarity with the subterranean world, «so distastefully in contrast to the gaiety of the world above» (p. 91). Yet, through his acquired familiarity with the «repulsive ashes of humanity» (p. 92), his instinctive relationship with the material world is corrected: «In his secret heart he had required of his religion, and duly found there, the justification, it might be, also the correction of a manner of taking things instinctive with him, which was, and must remain, after all, a part of himself» (p. 92). The doctrine of the Resurrection gives him access to «the entire circle of religious belief» (p. 92). His greater comprehension of spiritual life is associated with a greater comprehension of art, as he can now «frankly accept the world of sight» (p. 93). The physical world has been redeemed, and through the Incarnation «all visible beauty» has been sanctified, so that art does not speak to «errant eyes» (p. 93). Pater is affirming here, as he does throughout his work, the unity of spirit and matter, of sacred and profane:

Domenico was become, might one say, a spiritual, a religious, materialist; and by consequence a warmer lover than ever, as wealthy also an effective patron, of the living art of his day. Feeling as always that for his part he could never be moved at all by a wholly unsensuous world, he was glad to assure himself now that he need never again endeavour to detach religious considerations from the things which are seen. To know and love the visible world one need not go out of His presence. (p. 93)

13 On the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in Pater, see Hext (2013).

Paganism converges with Christianity, as God himself was «sane as those old Greeks» (p. 93). Beauty and horror are indistinguishable when the saint touches corpses, and so are Christian martyrs and pagan gods, who «might well arise together now in the new cathedral» (p. 94), where the images of the martyrs in their beautiful clothes reveal the legacy of a pagan worship of beauty. The assimilation of the two religions is the final note in the fragment.

The narrative shows a movement from idealization to inclusion and contamination. What is discarded, annulled, hidden, is given by Pater an intense visibility. Paradoxically the inert impure material gives solidity to the sanctity and purity of life. A beauty which is untouched by impurity is sterile, as dead as a painting, and needs correction. The living portrait itself becomes a metaphor for art that is touched from within by the real.

Pater offers his own story of duality and ambivalence; his works provide vertiginous examples of fractured golden worlds, dystopian visions of harmonic states, and attractions towards the impure. While in the above-mentioned essay on style he insists on the elementary particles of language, human life cannot discard its own elementariness either. Representations of pseudo-gods and saints include violence and impurity, and can be read in terms of contemporary codes, but Pater also seems to envisage more modern paradigms.

In his discussion of the *homo sacer*, Agamben explores the relationship between sacred and political structures, a nexus which late-Victorian and twentieth-century anthropology and culture ignored. Lying outside both the divine and the human sphere, the *homo sacer* lives in a condition of exceptionality which reflects the exceptional status of the sovereign in the political sphere. Agamben deconstructs the ambivalence of the sacred in order to read *sacratio* as an autonomous political category, outside the sphere of religion. *Sacratio* now consists of mere animal life, «nuda vita», which becomes dramatically insignificant when exposed to the power of sovereignty.

Agamben's concept of mere animal life, never far from death but somehow suspended and vicariously controlled, has become a paradigm of modernity. Pater's characters, themselves suspended between the real and the fictional, are perennially in a no man's land, belonging to a system but simultaneously eluding it. Unsure whether they want to belong, they can become a form of waste, an excluded residue, and need to be controlled and tested.

For Pater the aesthetic theorist, sacredness qualifies art, but art itself is enveloped by the materiality of life. His powerful statement in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* is «To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life», and fire is an image that Theodor W. Adorno was to use in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970):

[Fireworks] appear empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign of heaven yet artifactual, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes and indeed cannot be read for its meaning. The segregation of the aesthetic sphere by means of the complete afunctionality of what is thoroughly ephemeral is no formal definition of aesthetics. It is not through a higher perfection that artworks separate from the fallibly existent but rather by becoming actual, like fireworks, incandescently, in an expressive appearance. They are not only the other of the empirical world: Everything in them becomes other. (Adorno 2002, p. 81)

To burn always with aesthetic intensity is ecstasy, that is to be outside, suspended from life, abstracted, but this condition can never elude life. Pater's valuation of the impure affects the category of the sacred in that it is re-oriented towards the human. Guided by strategies of waste and instability, his spectral god and his ineffectual saint situate themselves within the category of ambivalence, confirming nineteenth-century assumptions about the impurity of the sacred. Pater was also, however, pushing the concept of the sacred in new directions. Indeed, his aesthetic prefigures spectral and divinised post-modernist identities, such as may be found in the world of spectacle and fashion, which are not tied to an invariable form but are instead flexible and ambiguous. Emptied of substance, purposely rendered superficial, they invite reflection on the confluence of the sacred and the aesthetic as interlinked spaces «for displaced, or repressed materials, both political and psychic» (Grady 2009, p. 30).

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## Late-Victorian Modes of the Aesthetic Impure The Strange Case of Arthur Machen

Gilles Menegaldo  
(Université de Poitiers, France)

**Abstract** In his fiction (novels and short stories), the Welsh fin de siècle writer Arthur Machen tends to feature various forms of transformations/mutations of the body, often associated with transgressive practices (scientific or occult experiments) implying some form of moral deviation or perversion in relation with forbidden knowledge. In *The Great God Pan* set in London, Machen stages one of these uncanny experiments, the mating of a young girl with the God Pan which brings to the world a feminine incarnation of evil who leads her many suitors to suicide. In *The Three Impostors*, a novel or rather a loosely connected collection of stories, the author emphasizes the way in which the supernatural encroaches upon the empirical world. Various modes of body hybridity and physical and mental degeneracy are foregrounded, but the description of these devolution processes generates a strong feeling of fascination mingled with a sense of horror and abjection, thus illustrating the notion of aesthetic impure which may be considered at various levels: in the diegetic universe, as an ethical issue, but also as a generic/textual one. The city of London itself appears as a cosmopolitan, hybrid, labyrinthine locus, invested with beauty and sublimity but also with decadence, moral corruption and archaic, primitive forms of behaviour. The text itself evinces a certain form of impurity because of its hybrid status and its use of various genre conventions at time verging upon parody or pastiche.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Impure and Hybrid as a Source of Horror and Aesthetic Fascination. – 3 Generic Hybridity. – 4 The London Metropolis as Aesthetic Impure. – 5 London as the Site of Observation, Investigation and Adventure. – 6 London as a Receptacle of Stories. – 7 The Aesthetic Impure, Modernity and Metatextual Effects. – 8 Conclusion.

**Keywords** Arthur Machen. Decadence. Hybridity. Metamorphosis.

### 1 Introduction

The combination of the two words «aesthetic» and «impure» may imply some kind of implicit contradiction and may be also a challenge to certain norms in matter of taste. Indeed to derive aesthetic pleasure out of an impure object might be problematic or subversive. The term «impure» can be used in various fields. For instance André Bazin, the French film theoretician, considers cinema as an impure form of art as it associates several features: text, image, sound (diegetic noises and voices) and music. In the domain of aesthetics, Kant associates beauty with the idea of purity

and unity while the sublime is implicitly linked with some form of impurity. Mary Douglas in her well known study, *Purity and Danger* (1966), identifies impurity with the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorization. Phenomena perceived as impure or otherwise dangerous within a culture are thus violating the classificatory systems through which the culture is able meaningfully to organize experience. Things that are interstitial, that cross boundaries of deep-set categories in a given culture, may be seen as impure. Julia Kristeva, defining her concept of abjection, also emphasizes the notion of liminality, in-betweenness, mixity, all that which prevents differentiation: «Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte» (Kristeva 1980, p. 12).

Noël Carroll, in *The Philosophy of Horror*, takes up this concept to define his approach to horror literature (and film). For him, the monsters of the horror genre are «beings or creatures that specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitiality and categorical contradictoriness» (Carroll 1990, p. 32). The author provides some obvious examples: ghosts, zombies, mummies, werewolves, humanoid insects or Dr. Moreau's «manimals». Thus in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the notion of impurity is cardinal and plays on different levels. Within the diegesis, the vampire is interstitial, in-between life and death, transgressing space and time boundaries, shape-shifting. His peculiar predatory mode, blood sucking, raises also the problem of contamination. As an example, among many others, we may remember Jonathan Harker's description of Count Dracula in his coffin:

There lay the Count but looking as if his youth had been half renewed, for the white hair and moustache were changed to dark iron-grey; the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath; the mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were gouts of fresh blood which trickled from the corners of the mouth and ran over the chin and the neck. Even the deep, burning eyes seemed set amongst swollen flesh, for the lids and pouches underneath were bloated. It seemed as if the whole awful creature were simply gorged with blood; he lay like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion. (Auerbach, Skal 1997, p. 53)

This horrible spectacle triggers within Jonathan Harker a nightmarish image of invasion: «This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless» (p. 54).

The novel is also textually impure as it mingles various heterogeneous documents (diaries, letters, press cuttings, telegrams, business or legal documents, gramophone recordings, etc.), combines popular (sensation

fiction devices) and high culture (quotations from Shakespeare and other literary references) and also various genres, such as gothic, supernatural horror, detective fiction, fairy tale, and travelogue.

Since all these aspects<sup>1</sup> of Stoker's novel have been studied extensively, this article will focus on Arthur Machen, a relatively less well known author whose work also provides a good illustration of the notion of aesthetic impurity, both in terms of the fictional universe it depicts and because of its specific narrative construction and playing upon generic conventions.

In his fiction (novels and short stories), the Welsh fin de siècle writer Arthur Machen tends to feature various forms of transformations/mutations of the body, often associated with transgressive practices (scientific or occult experiments) implying some form of moral deviation or perversion in relation with ancient and/or forbidden knowledge. In *The Great God Pan* (1894), a novel set in London, Machen stages one of these uncanny experiments, the mating of a young girl with the God Pan which brings to the world a feminine incarnation of evil who leads her many suitors to suicide. In *The Three Impostors* (1895), a novel or rather a loosely connected collection of stories, the author emphasizes the way in which the supernatural encroaches upon the empirical world. Various modes of bodily hybridity and physical and mental degeneracy are foregrounded, but the description of these devolution processes generates a strong feeling of fascination mingled with a sense of horror and abjection, thus illustrating the notion of aesthetic impurity which may be considered at various levels: in the diegetic universe in terms of the spectacular representation of horror and the abject, as an ethical issue, but also as a generic/textual one. Indeed, the text itself evinces a certain form of impurity because of its hybrid status and its use of various genre conventions at time verging upon parody or pastiche.

Arthur Machen is known to us through some of his works but also through the tribute paid to him by H.P. Lovecraft in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Lovecraft confesses his debt to the Welsh writer, one of his literary mentors. Both writers are concerned with the coexistence of modernity and ancestral rites, with the return of the archaic and the ancient gods. Both deal with the question of body metamorphosis and processes of hybridization, as for example in *The Great God Pan* where a transgressive experiment leads to the creation of an evil woman figure that assumes various identities. A central idea in Machen's work is also that trivial daily life reality is only a mask behind which unnamable terrors lurk, hence the use of the recurrent metaphor of the «tearing of the veil» to perceive reality as it is. Machen uses a narrative structure based

1 Narrative strategies and generic hybridity have been analyzed by several scholars over the last three decades. See for example Seed (1985) and Wicke (1992).

on investigation leading to the elucidation of a mystery, often involving a crime or a series of crimes. He gets closer to the conventions of the story of detection by having recourse to a recurrent investigative character named Dyson who shares some features with the author: they both live in London, have a relatively mediocre social status, a similar taste for literature and the arts, and a passion for words and writing. Indeed Dyson's favourite quest is the «chase of the phrase» (Joshi 2001, p. 214). Thus by means of this «Mr. Seek» to quote Stevenson,<sup>2</sup> Machen stages in several stories a quest narrative where investigation implies the deciphering of enigmas and the interpretation of signs both graphic and linguistic, an intellectual and analytical process which also involves the reader.

Indeed, in most of Dyson's cases, investigation starts with a relatively matter of fact event (abduction, disappearance, murder), then it reaches a point when rational explanations prove impossible or unsatisfactory, thus leading to the emergence of the fantastic. Through the detective plot, the reader passes smoothly from the empirical, rational world to a more uncanny form of experience involving different facets of otherness. Machen associates two protagonists, Dyson and his close friend Charles Phillips, both similar and different. Both characters are relatively young and can be defined as dilettantes. Phillips is an amateur ethnologist whose limited competence leads him, in a story called «The Red Hand», to confuse authentic prehistoric artefacts with rather crude copies. Dyson, far from being a professional detective like Sherlock Holmes, introduces himself rather as a writer who has a passion for mysteries. While Phillips constantly loses his bearings and gets lost in the mazes of London streets, Dyson is endowed with a keen sense of orientation. The two protagonists do not live like Holmes and Watson under the same roof, but they meet regularly to smoke a pipe, drink a glass of beer and observe the spectacle outside in the streets. These habits partake of the building up of a familiar and prosaic world where people walk, muse, eat and drink. It is often by chance that the two strollers get involved and absorbed in an uncanny experience, either criminal as in «The Red Hand» or fraught with supernatural elements as in *The Three Impostors* on which I shall primarily focus, after a few remarks on *The Great God Pan*.

2 In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Utterson declares: «'If he be Mr. Hyde', he had thought, 'I shall be Mr. Seek'» (Stevenson 1992, p. 106).

## 2 The Impure and Hybrid as a Source of Horror and Aesthetic Fascination

As has been pointed out by many critics, the Victorian age is beset by many fears and phobias having to do with devolution, physical and mental degeneracy and hybridization, ethnic and cultural contamination, criminality in large cities, etc. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, published in the same year (1897), testify to this Victorian fin de siècle *Angst* as they both feature a form of alien invasion and contamination coming from the East – Eastern Europe, in one case, Egypt in the other. As Judith Halberstam shows, the two novels share many features: «Like *Dracula*, the Beetle's disgusting aspect depends upon its foreign features, its un-English habits and a certain penchant for human blood. The Beetle does not suck blood however, she demands it in the form of human sacrifice» (Halberstam 2002, p. 101). Kelly Hurley also devotes several pages to a close analysis of *The Beetle*, as an embodiment of all the worst forms of hybridization and abjection.

Arthur Machen, at least in the first part of his literary career, partakes of this obsessive, paranoid approach. His fiction also relies on the theories of Lombroso and Max Nordau on degeneracy and criminality (also quoted in *Dracula* by Mina Harker). Already in *The Great God Pan*, Machen stages Helen Vaughan, a diabolical female character who is a perfect incarnation of evil, of physical and moral corruption, implicitly associated with immoral and pervert sexual practices even though we never learn anything concrete about these practices as all potential witnesses refuse to disclose any detail or even to read concrete testimonies. Indeed, when Austin, one of the investigators, is given a written memoir, he only glances at the contents and lets the diary fall to the ground, expressing sheer horror and disgust: «Sick at heart, with white lips and a cold sweat pouring like water from his temples, he flung the paper down» (Joshi 2001, p. 42). Austin, a man of good taste, expresses a moral viewpoint by refusing to read further and to revel in abominable details about the depraved behaviour of Helen and its lethal consequences, but he is also physically affected by the little he has read, only a word and a phrase that will never be quoted and are left to the imagination of the reader. On the contrary, Clarke, Raymond's friend, is an amateur of uncanny, supernatural events, beyond a self-asserted rationality and he compiles in secret his own encyclopedia of horrors, *Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil*.

Helen Vaughan's perversion is accounted for by the fact she is the product of a transgressive experiment practised on her mother by Raymond, a doctor and dabbler in transcendental medicine, a rather simple form of brain surgery («a slight lesion in the grey matter»), supposedly leading to the lifting of the veil on true reality, that is equated, according to

ancient knowledge, with «seeing the God Pan». The operation succeeds and the girl does see Pan. Presumably she even has some sort of sexual intercourse with him, which leads to the birth of the hybrid Helen, whose beauty seduces and fascinates while at the same time conveying a sense of horror and the non-human.

Onomastics are already revealing here as Helen Vaughan's true name (she has also the identity of Mrs. Beaumont) has obvious hybrid connotations. As Helen, she is the embodiment of seduction by means of association with Helen of Troy, but her family name Vaughan is phonologically close to the word «faun», recalling the hybrid semi-monstrous nature (origin) of the woman. Indeed, the heroine is clearly associated with impurity, both moral and ontological on different counts. Her beauty is the product of a transgressive, unethical form of surgery leading to an unnatural sexual union between a human female and a God. Her own physical appearance reflects that impure origin: the beauty of a goddess, but also the stigmata of the inhuman, ab-human, monstrous. Mrs. Beaumont both fascinates and repels the aristocrats whom she ensnares on account of her strange looks (and her dark Italian complexion) and whom she either leads to suicide or reduces to the status of beggars like Herbert, one of the investigators of this strange case defined as «a nest of Chinese boxes» (p. 17).

This image fits the narrative structure of the novel itself, made of embedded texts coming from varied sources of enunciation and made more complex by added fragments of manuscripts and letters whose contents remain often mysterious or cryptic. After the prologue that provides some hints to the perceptive reader (who may guess who Helen Vaughan is), the story takes up the form of a quest for a beautiful *femme fatale*, seemingly responsible for a series of mysterious deaths, unexplained irrational suicides, amongst the London aristocracy. Several investigators are inter-related, each providing his own contribution in order to solve the enigma. This leads to a polyphonic narrative made of various oral and written testimonies (diaries, letters, memoranda). Helen Vaughan, like Hyde, can't be really described. During a police investigation, she is defined by witnesses as «At once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on» (p. 20). Austin, another friend of Villiers, also stresses the uncanny contrast between her exquisite features and her strange expression. Her portrait drawn by painter Arthur Meyrick reveals nothing more, highlighting the same traits, a glance, a smile on the full lips, but it makes Clarke shudder and turn «as white as death» as he watches «the most vivid presentment of evil I have ever seen» (p. 25).

The climactic death scene of Helen Vaughan, compelled to hang herself, is related in another embedded narrative, a manuscript written by Dr. Robert Matheson (who himself died of apoplectic seizure). This scene is an example of what Mary Douglas refers to as interstitial «bodily margins» (Douglas 1966, p. 122), conveying both to the protagonists of the tale and

to the reader a sense of the aesthetic impure, a mingling of fascination and horror felt by the eye-witness who reports his traumatic experience of watching a breaking of the boundaries between the human and the non-human:

I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed. (Joshi 2001, p. 46)

As Sophie Mantrant writes in her remarkable (soon to be published) monograph on the Welsh writer, *L'art du hiéroglyphe: essai sur la fiction d'Arthur Machen*, the body of Dr. Matheson, witness to this horrifying mutation, is also affected as if it were also threatened with contagion and dissolution. He won't survive the experience of the abject like Dr. Haberdern in «The Novel of the White Powder» (and Dr. Lanyon in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). In addition to the diegesis, the text itself, already fragmented, heterogeneous, seems to be contaminated. The manuscript accounting for the experience, made of notes scribbled hastily in Latin, contains abbreviations, suspension marks and blanks and it is sometimes illegible. As Mantrant states: «The intrusion of italics in this short segment visually marks the destabilization of the text whose homogeneity is threatened» (Mantrant, p. 32, my translation). The text itself is marked with impurity and the last chapter, full of blanks, is fittingly entitled «The fragments». The whole novella can be seen according to Mantrant as a «deliquescent body, verging upon the protoplasmic, the formless» (p. 32, my translation). These motifs of amorphousness, viscousness, dissolution and contamination will be taken up in *The Three Impostors*.

*The Great God Pan* is indeed remarkable on account of its particularly complex, fragmented and heterogeneous structure. Its originality relies on its «impurity» in terms of form, which echoes or mirrors the ontological impurity of the heroine. However, despite this multi-layered set-up and fragmentation, the narrative remains focused on the same story from beginning to end. The structure is also circular as we revert in the epilogue to a scene between the same protagonists who featured in the prologue, that is Raymond and his friend. The epilogue provides some missing facts, confirming the supernatural origin of Helen Vaughan, born nine months after her mother was compelled to «see Pan». During his evocation of the event, Raymond also expresses a kind of remorse, though he still asserts that his theory was sound: «It was an ill work I did that night when you were present; I broke open the door of the house of life, without knowing or caring what might pass forth or enter it [...] You did well to blame me, but my theory was not all absurdity. What I said Mary would see, she saw,



but I forgot that no human eyes could look on such a vision with impunity» (Joshi 2001, p. 50). Raymond is a prototypic hubristic mad scientist who associates the human and the divine to create a hybrid, interstitial creature that challenges good taste and Victorian morality.

In *The Three Impostors*, the aesthetic impure is foregrounded at various levels, both within the main narrative and the embedded ones. The main narrative, the search for Joseph Walters who, out of sheer panic, stole or rather inadvertantly took away with him a precious unique roman coin, the Gold Tiberius, is already full of references to a certain form of taste or aesthetic bent verging on the perverse and the sadistic. Dr. Lipsius, the mastermind and orchestrator of all the events, is a collector of rare, ancient, precious objects and has constituted his own museum to which Helen, his woman accomplice, wishes to contribute. She gives him the severed finger of Joseph Walters, the victim, one among numerous gruesome details in the novel. A second characteristic feature of Lipsius is that his taste for art extends to his criminal activities. Indeed, like Thomas De Quincey (*On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*), he thinks that murder should be carried out as a work of art and set up as a spectacle. The novel offers two illustrations of this 'philosophy'.

We find a reflection of these features in the embedded narratives, which however introduce new topics and go far beyond in horror and abjection. The motif of quaint taste is developed in one of the episodes told by Burton, «The Novel of the Iron Maid». The narrator tells of his encounter with a strange old man, Mr. Mathias, whom he meets by chance while walking home. This man he only knows by sight, offers him hospitality, but his main aim seems to have him visit his private museum, a collection of torture intruments from various countries and periods. The owner relishes describing with lavish details the various instruments and, in so doing, triggers a feeling of revulsion on the part of Burton. He especially emphasizes the refinement of the Orientals, though no Oriental artefact is actually described apart from a vaguely referred to «contrivance»: «These are the Chinese contrivances; you have heard of the 'Heavy Death'? it is my hobby, this sort of thing. Do you know, I often sit there, hour after hour, and meditate over the collection. I fancy I see the faces of the men who have suffered, faces lean with agony, and wet with sweats of deathgrowing distinct out of the gloom and I hear the echoes of their cries for mercy» (Joshi 2001, p. 190).

This is a clear instance of a pervert fascination for physical torture and death which we may associate with a form of aesthetic impurity. Mr. Mathias then introduces his latest find, just received from Germany, «The Iron Maid», a large statue of a naked woman, fashioned in green bronze, which he describes with a touch of pride as «quite a work of art» (p. 190). However, the macabre irony of the text's closure transforms the collector himself into an object, a spectacle of horror when, without taking heed

of the instructions provided in a note, he triggers the lethal mechanism of the metallic artefact. The dramatic outcome is announced, as often in Machen's fiction, by a sheer sound, unnoticed at first: «There was a slight click of which I took no notice», then more ominously «a sudden whirr, the noise of machinery in motion» occurs, lastly changing in a «heavy droning» (p. 190). The evolution of the sound conveys the ongoing, slow but inexorable deathly process by which the collector becomes a victim of the collected object. We may emphasize that the artefact has a female shape, that her body is naked and that the small knob triggering her mortal embrace is situated between her breasts, thus associating a form of morbid eroticism and death: «The head had slowly bent down, and the green lips were on the lips of Mathias» (p. 191).

### 3 Generic Hybridity

*The Three Impostors*, written in 1890, but only published in 1895, is indeed a hybrid and «impure» narrative in-between novel and collection of stories. Its specificity relies partly on its structure defined by circularity and the embedding of seemingly heterogeneous and self-contained narratives. However this narrative model is not fully original as it is borrowed from R.L. Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* (1885), a sequel to *The New Arabian Nights*, featuring Prince Florizel of Bohemia. Indeed both works follow the same structural pattern. A frame narrative introduces the various protagonists whose stories are narrated in turn, these stories containing secondary narratives. Stevenson's text also opens with a prologue introducing the three main protagonists, three young men, talented, elegant and well-dressed, but penniless and eager to succeed in life. They are offered by a mysterious shopkeeper, Mr. Godall, to investigate upon a seemingly dangerous man who will later be identified as the dynamiter, a mad terrorist bent on destroying London with his home-made bombs.

The prologue of *The Three Impostors* stages a seemingly banal situation, a simple conversation. In fact the opening sentence, «and Mr. Joseph Walters is going to stay the night?» (p. 102), does not address a potential visitor but concerns a dying man who has just been tortured. The male locutor, «smooth and clean-shaven», addresses a more hairy one, «not of the most charming appearance » (p. 102). The physical traits of the two men become clues as well as the colour of the eyes, a shining hazel, of a third female character who enters stage afterwards. This trio echoes the title of the novel, but the text remains enigmatic. We don't know anything about the «young man with spectacles», the victim. Each protagonist invokes one or several names that also constitute masks: «I propose to say good-bye here to my friend Mr. Burton», «I bid adieu to Mr. Wilkins», «Farewell to Miss Lally and Miss Leicester» (pp. 102-103). The reader will

soon learn that these very names, Burton, Wilkins, Miss Lally and Miss Leicester, correspond to various fictitious identities borrowed by the three accomplices. These names are quoted regularly through the various embedded narratives while their real names (Davies, Richmond and Helen) are only provided once.

The structure is also circular since the last episode brings us back to the same enigmatic place and to the same time, only slightly later, a few minutes after the departure of the three impostors who are now identified as criminals. Dyson and his friend cannot do anything to prevent the death of the young man whom they discover has been burnt alive. This time discrepancy underlines ironically the fact that Dyson and Phillips do not control the events and are essentially manipulated, their role being limited to the part of listeners (narratees) to the tales told by the impostors, crime or supernatural stories. The different embedded narratives aim at involving Dyson and Phillips in the quest for the young bespectacled man.

The inscription in a tale of detection of secondary narratives belonging to other literary genres (supernatural horror, exotic adventure) or modes (satire, parody) raises doubts as to the generic identity of the text. The reader also wonders what is true, what is authentic or unreliable, what is primary or secondary. The embedded stories have more impact on the reader than the investigation narrative because of their sheer poetic and horrific intensity, which prevails over the relative triviality of the main plot. The parodic and ironic dimension, noticeable in some passages, also identifies this pseudo-novel with a metatextual literary game.

The first main embedded narrative, a «novel» told by Henry Wilkins, supposedly the son of a «poor but learned clergyman» (an obvious cliché), takes place in the USA, in a remote mining area close to the Rocky mountains. The narrator tells of his acting as a secretary for a man named Smith who proves to be the leader of a secret society, dealing in blackmail and murder. This exotic adventure story is highly derivative of Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and of Stevenson's «Story of the Destroying Angel» (from *The Dynamiter*, 1885), both set in a Mormon community. The second «novel» is set in Wales, but again in a remote and wild place: «Barren and savage hills, and ragged commonland, a territory all strange and unvisited, and more unknown to Englishmen than the very heart of Africa» (p. 148). The story is more complex, containing another embedded text, but it also partakes of a different genre, much closer to the gothic trend, with different shades of terror and horror. So is the third main narrative, «The Novel of the White Powder», a story of horrible physical transformation and reversion to *materia prima*, providing spectacular visions of an aesthetic impure. The mere mention of an impure powder causing the mutation is obviously a reference to Jekyll's potion in Stevenson's novel, but Machen goes further in the detailed description of the mutation seen as a continuous relentless and abject process. «The Novel of the Iron Maid» provides,

as we saw, another example of sensational horror story. In-between those main embeddings, several other narratives are inserted, including the testimony of the victim, Joseph Walters.

By means of all these stories often told by unreliable narrators who don various masks to hide their true identity, we are carried to other spaces, to the American wilderness, to Wales and the land of the little people, to Italy, Germany, the Orient and Africa thanks also to numerous intertextual allusions. As stated by Claire Wrobel, a movement of interiorization is noticeable in this structure, with a gradual refocusing on London, seen as a locus of contamination by evil, affecting even such prestigious institutions as the British Museum, where Dr. Lipsius first encounters Joseph Walters and ensnares him (Wrobel 2008, p. 342).

The relative complexity of this multilayered narrative necessitates a constant work of deciphering. In these fictions, the city of London plays a prominent part in various ways, as realistic setting, imaginary locus, but also as a stage for drama and a source of intradiegetic storytelling.

#### 4 The London Metropolis as Aesthetic Impure

In *The Three Impostors*, we do have a realistic approach to the city which is apprehended by means of walking through the streets and observing the spectacle of the crowd at all times of day and night, with a lot of emphasis on movement, the hectic circulation of people and vehicles, and the play of lights and shadows. We are given very precise locations of the various dwellings mentioned. However London is fraught with uncanny connotations and becomes a mysterious, poetic, at time horrifying locus, a maze where the traveller loses spatial as well as time points of reference.

The city appears as varied, multiform, cosmopolitan, hybrid. It is a labyrinthine locus, invested with beauty and sublimity but also with decadence, squalor, moral corruption and primitive/regressive forms of behaviour. The metropolis is the site of a series of metamorphoses blurring the boundaries between the real and the unreal. During their strolls, Dyson and Phillips pass through many different districts of London from the posh bourgeois areas of Oxford Street or Picadilly to the more popular areas of the Strand and finally reach the grim sinister district of Clerkenwell. But we also discover other parts of the city through the secondary narratives. In «The Novel of the Iron Maid», Burton the narrator walks from a far suburban area towards Waterloo bridge, through «mere protoplasmic streets, beginning in orderly fashion with serried two-storied houses, and ending suddenly in waste, and pits and rubbish-heaps, and fields whence the magic had departed» (Joshi 2001, p. 187). To characterize the city, Machen uses a number of images and metaphors suggesting hybridity, contradiction, incongruity and various form of aesthetic impurity.

What is indeed emphasized is the juxtaposition of extremes of beauty and ugliness: «Beyond, the streets were curious, wild in their irregularities, here a row of sordid dingy dwellings, dirty and disreputable in appearance, and there, without warning, stood a house, genteel and prim, with wire blinds and brazen knocker, as clean and trim as if it had been the doctor's house in some benighted little country town» (pp. 215-216). London is also characterized by a certain architectural style (a jagged skyline) which is compared favourably to the Paris just rebuilt by Haussmann: «Conceive if you can a human being of ordinary intelligence preferring the boulevards to our London Streets; imagine a man calling for the wholesale destruction of our most charming city, in order that the dull uniformity of that whited sepulchre called Paris should be reproduced here in London. Is it not positively incredible?» (p. 177).

A second trait concerns the opposition between noise and silence, which changes in relation to the area and the moment of the day. The narrator describes accurately the bustle of the city and its characteristic noises during the day. He emphasizes also movement, dynamism, circulation, describing the traffic of the city along Oxford Street: «A treble line of hansom, carriages, vans, cabs and omnibuses was tearing East and West, and not the most daring adventurer of the crossings would have cared to try his fortune» (p. 112). Contrary to this, Dyson lives in a moderately quiet street where he «held his finger on the pulse of life without being deafened with the thousand rumours of the main arteries of London» (p. 213). In the same way, in the area of Notting Hill, close to Abingdon Grove, «one is conscious of a certain calm, a drowsy peace, which made the feet inclined to loiter» (p. 191). The noisy atmosphere of central London is contrasted by moments when characters stroll along empty streets, or even narrow passages paved with flagstones. As they stray away from the center, noises are less intense, muffled by the distance. In the last episode of the novel, Dyson and Phillips reach a suburban area, which looks appealing because of its silence and the presence of nature: «and presently the half-finished road ended, a quiet lane began, and they were beneath the shade of elm trees» (p. 231). This quietude will prove misleading.

Another feature is the emphasis on lighting or the interplay of lights and shadows. The most pleasurable moment seems to be in the evening when the sun is setting: «the last flush of sunset», «the pale greens and fading blues and flushing clouds of sunset» (p. 91). Two kinds of artificial light are contrasted: the soft light diffused by the gas-lamps contrasts with the blinding radiance of the electric light: «the lounging idlers by the public-house, and the casual passers-by rather flickered and hovered in the play of lights than stood out substantial things» (p. 106). People are spectralized and become part of an uncanny spectacle. The description of London just after sunset plays upon lights and shadows and the varied hues taken by the sky and clouds, but it also relies upon sounds to conjure up an

unreal and uncanny mood: «A chiaroscuro that had something unearthly», «a figure would shape itself and vanish», «semi-theatrical magic» (p. 106). This mingling of perceptions blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, object and subject, and partakes of a form of aesthetic impurity. Thus London is seen as a place of contrasts, both in terms of architecture and people. Lastly London is often associated with the notion of maze, labyrinth where one loses one's landmarks. The complexity of space organization, but also the sense of surprise, unexpectedness, discovery leads to a mood of mystery which is recurrently evoked.

## 5 London as the Site of Observation, Investigation and Adventure

London is used as a dramatic setting, a backcloth for narrative. Characters either follow a determined course dictated by somebody who holds authority like Lipsius (as Walters does when he follows the instructions of the fatal letter) or are dependent on chance encounters, the text playing upon a dynamic tension between these two contradictory approaches.

Contrary to some kinds of pre-determined movement with a purpose, the text refers recurrently to the notion of strolling idly,<sup>3</sup> purposelessly through the various areas of the city. Both Dyson and Phillips walk endlessly through the city streets, discovering new, at times disquieting areas, propitious to uncanny experiences. London is also a place of encounters, either casual or contrived. Dyson meets Phillips by chance at a tobacco shop and they become close friends. In the same way seemingly, Joseph Walters first meets Dr. Lipsius, the criminal brain, rather casually in the reading room of the British museum: «I became acquainted with a serene and benevolent gentleman, a man somewhat past middle age, who nearly always occupied a desk next to mine» (p. 219). However, the gentleman's benevolence is quite misleading and his frequenting the venerable Library suggests that crime wears many masks.

Thus London becomes a place of investigation on both counts. On the one hand, the three emissaries of Lipsius are following the track of the young Joseph Walters and seeking for clues, by using false identities and telling stories to unknown passers-by. We may wonder how they choose their potential witnesses who become privileged listeners, but also figurations of the reader who discovers the narrative along with them. We may also wonder what the efficiency of this technique of investigation may be.

3 The concept of stroller (*flâneur*), present in Baudelaire's poetry where it applies to the poet wandering through the streets of Paris is later taken up by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished book on Baudelaire (1973).

We have to suppose that the three storytellers tell their tales to as many Londoners as they can, just in case one of them may have a valuable piece of information on their prey. Thus they mostly rely on chance and coincidence.

On the other hand, Dyson tries to inquire on the mystery of the «young man with spectacles». Dyson is endowed with a prime quality, the gift for observation. The beginning of the narrative entitled «The Encounter on the Pavement», a rather commonplace title, is rich with terms suggesting this quality: «Mr. Dyson [...] staring with bland inquiry at whatever caught his attention, enjoyed in all its rare flavours the sensation that he was really hard at work. His observation of mankind, the traffic and the shop windows tickled his faculties with an exquisite bouquet. [...] He was attentive in his glances to right and left for fear he should miss some circumstances of the most acute significance» (pp. 111-112).

However, the text is tinged with ironical touches. Contrary to Sherlock Holmes who uses his gifts of observation in specific circumstances and in order to find clues, Dyson merely observes the flux of life and the movement of the traffic in the London streets. He is sensitive to the attitudes of the passers-by and on the look-out for some event that may happen or may not. Thus he persuades himself that this is genuine work: «He looked serious, as one looks on whom charges of weight and moment are laid» (p. 112). The narrator uses ironical expressions in order to describe Dyson's confrontation with the spectacle offered by the street «gaping like a fish» and adopts a mock heroic tone, referring to «the most daring adventurer of the crossings», as if crossing a street were indeed a form of adventurous endeavour. Dyson is also fond of formulas such as: «I always like to be accurate» which is ironically denounced by the narrator: «As he somewhat pompously expressed, he held his finger on the pulse of life» (p. 134). Dyson is also characterized by naivety and credulousness and, in the course of his dealings with other characters, he is easily manipulated and deceived.

At the same time, Dyson is sensitive to matters of external appearance and taste and he senses that something is amiss with Mr. Henry Wilkins whose personality clashes with his elegant clothes: «From his hat to his boots, everything seemed inappropriate. His silk hat, Dyson thought, should have been a high bowler of odious pattern, worn with a baggy morning-coat, and an instinct told him that the fellow did not commonly carry a clean pocket-handkerchief. The face was not of the most agreeable pattern, and was in no way improved by a pair of bulbous chin-whiskers of a ginger hue, into which moustaches of like colour melted imperceptibly» (p. 113).

These dominant traits are introduced at the beginning of *The Three Impostors*. Dyson is presented as a man of letters, but also as «an unhappy instance of talents misapplied» (p. 105). Thus, from the outset, the narrator adopts an ironical stance: «He knew nothing of the logic of life and he flattered himself with the title of artist, when he was in fact but an idle and



curious spectator of other men's endeavours» (p. 105). Later, the anonymous narrator evokes Dyson's illusions: «He delivered himself a little with the name of artist, yet his amusements were eminently harmless» (p. 135). The image that is given of Dyson is rather that of a banal individual, neither gifted for literature nor for the sciences and who lives an idle life with a few male companions. Thus Machen features an anti-hero, a failed artist (he has never published a line) far remote from characters like Dupin or Holmes who are endowed with a superior intellect and imagination. Contrary to Holmes, who relies on his powers of induction and deduction and pays attention to the slightest material detail which could be a clue, Dyson only relies on chance encounters to solve enigmas. Hence, Machen subverts the conventions of the detective tale by foregrounding the incompetence of the investigator who is also easily deluded and manipulated by clever criminals endowed with the gift of storytelling.

In that context, London becomes a locus of conflict, tension, a place of chaos, an «urban chaosmos» as Kelly Hurley states in *The Gothic Body* (Hurley 1996, p. 159), but it is also metatextually associated with fiction.

## 6 London as a Receptacle of Stories

For all these qualities, London becomes a receptacle of stories, real or potential or dreamt of, true or fabricated, contrived, offered by the various protagonists to the two main characters, Dyson and Phillips, who play the part of narratees and thus can be partly identified with a reading instance. Both characters, moreover, are associated with language and story-telling or -writing. Thus going through London and encountering people leads to the unravelling of stories, more and more uncanny, even fantastic or improbable because of the excessive predicaments they delineate, even though at times they have a ring of truth. The novel is structured loosely thanks to these storytellers casually met. As Kelly Hurley observes: «Dyson stumbles onto fantastic tales in progress, of orgies, murders, corpses in mummy cases, dramatic pursuits. The city yields narrative, wildly sensational narratives at every turn»; «London becomes a dense clamorous place from which to extract sensation, incident, narrative» (pp. 164-166). London is not only the backcloth, it literally produces fictions. Some are seemingly real accounts such as the story told by Joseph Walters which contains relatively few references to violence or transgression. We learn nothing concerning the orgiastic rituals the character may be submitted to (and the language is subdued and elliptical). The only graphic detail provided is the reference to the disposing of the body of the victim, Mr. Headley, who carries the gold Tiberius: «I peered into the face, while he held the lamp. The flesh was black with the passing of the centuries but as I looked I saw upon the right cheekbone a small triangular scar, and the

secret of the mummy flashed upon me: I was looking at the dead body of the man whom I had decoyed into that house» (Joshi 2001, p. 228). This gruesome spectacle induces a state of panic and subsequent flight, sealing the fate of Joseph Walters.

There are also potential narratives for would-be writers. Thus a young friend of Dyson, Edgar Russell, who has failed to produce any work so far, is aware of the fictional potential of the city and he fantasizes about his future project:

It dawned upon me that I would write the history of a street. Every house should form a volume. I fixed upon the street, I saw each house and read as clearly as in letters the physiology and psychology of each: the little byway stretched before me in its actual shape – a street that I know and have passed down a hundred times; with some twenty houses, prosperous and mean, and lilac bushes in purple blossom. And yet it was at the same time a symbol, a *via dolorosa* of hopes cherished and disappointed, of years of monotonous existence without content or discontent, of tragedies and obscure sorrows; and on the door of one of those houses I saw the red stain of blood, and behind a window two shadows, blackened and faded on the blind, as they swayed on tightened cords, the shadows of a man and a woman hanging in a vulgar gaslit parlour. These were my fancies; but when pen touched paper they shrivelled and vanished away. (p. 193)

Contrary to this creative impotence, the three intra-diagetic narrators are extremely gifted and vivid in spinning their stories. There are in fact seven narratives, which are all told either to Dyson or Phillips through a casual encounter with someone of the trio who assumes a false identity each time. «The Novel of the Dark Valley» is told by Wilkins, alias Richmond, who pretends to be a victim of a mysterious Smith, whereas of course Richmond is the henchman of Dr. Lipsius, the true criminal brain. The third narrative, «The Novel of the Black Seal», is preceded by another meeting, that of Phillips with a young woman, Miss Lally, who pretends she has lost her young brother in mysterious circumstances: «In one moment of horror I realized that it was a formless thing that had mouldered for many years in the grave. The flesh was peeled in strips from the bones and hung apart dry and granulated [...] and the fingers that encircled my brother's arms were all unshapen, claw-like things and one was but a stump from which the end had rotted off» (p. 136). This morbid, macabre and highly gothic vision is soon interpreted by Phillips as a hallucination caused by the woman's suffering: «You expected to see your brother, you were alarmed because you did not see him and unconsciously, no doubt your brain went to work, and finally you saw a mere projection of your own morbid thoughts – a vision of your absent brother, and a mere confu-

sion of terrors incorporated in a figure which you can't describe» (p. 137).

However this description, especially the detail of the warped hand, reminds the reader of a detail in the prologue, when Helen shows a little package, «all oozing and dripping», which is said to contain «the hand that took the gold Tiberius» (p. 104). In the light of Miss Lally's gothic description, the reader can operate a series of correlations and wonder if there may be links between the package and the nighmarish vision of the brother accompanied by the living-dead man. The mutilated hand is probably that of the tortured young man, identified here with the vanished brother. This vision is thus a lie, but it is also proleptic. It adumbrates the final torture of Joseph Walters, burnt alive and amputated. This description has a dual function: it provides an explanation to a cryptic dialogue and announces the tragic outcome of the whole story.

The reader is thus gradually led to reinterpret even the descriptive elements of the city. Far from being purely decorative, albeit pictorial touches, these elements become part of the drama and acquire an ominous dimension. The urban landscape or details of the decor become something to be deciphered. In the same way, before the two strollers are confronted with the horrifying spectacle of physical death, the text adumbrates this macabre discovery thanks to textual elements that evoke death and decomposition, image of gangrene, of wounds, graveyard, allusion to worms and to the «danse macabre»: «Black pustules and festering sores swelled and clustered on fair limbs – and the fairy blood had boiled» (p. 232). That last image conveys an idea of how the body has been destroyed by the flames. Again, the textual fabric anticipates the diegetic discovery of the corpse of Joseph Walters. The narrative is a cryptic manuscript that the reader must decipher, not only in terms of narrative embedding, but in some meaningful lexical and syntactic elements.

Another textual transformation concerns colours. In the prologue, the colour red is only evoked in the description of the setting sun: «The sun slid down and shone red» (p. 103). The lexis remains neutral, describing a natural process. The dominant colours of the passage are grey and green. In the epilogue, however, the text is saturated with references to the red colour and fire images: «all the West and South were in flames», «the glow shone reflected» (p. 231). These images, especially the first one, may be seen as romantic clichés, aiming at a poetic evocation of the intense light of the setting sun, suffusing the horizon line. However, they must also be linked to another source of light, the fire which burns inside the house, ablaze on the very flesh of the «young man with spectacles». Thus, the recourse to a simile – «it seemed as if blood and fire were mingled» (p. 231) – which appears as an extended metaphor associated with the sun, is also evocative of the tragic fate which is being sealed (i.e., the fusion of flames and organic flesh).

The inside of the house where the victim is sacrificed offers a setting which perfectly illustrates the notion of aesthetic impurity. The wall paper

is a mingling of what is left of the wealth and decorum of the place, «a rich old flock paper» and various signs of degradation and corruption, «blackened with vague patches of rising damp» (p. 232). The baroque painted ceiling, once featuring cupids in vivid colours, is «disfigured with sores of dampness» (p. 232), changing the very meaning of the painting, transforming a celebration of classic conventions of Love into a dance of Death. Moreover, the painted two-dimensional bodies seem to acquire some kind of organic life by means of the decaying process that affects the texture of the material: «black pustules and festering sores swelled and clustered on fair limbs and smiling faces showed corruption, and the fairy blood had boiled with the germs of foul disease» (p. 232). Here indeed some form of bad taste is invoked by means of an uncanny and impure combination of features which conveys an impression of both physical and moral decay. The work of art becomes an object of abjection.

The description of the fountain and of the bronze triton erected in the midst of the courtyard provides another illustration. In the prologue, the triton is only covered with rust. In the epilogue, the text refers to the «bronze flesh» of the triton, introducing a new element which suggests the macabre ritual that is being carried at the very moment. The lexical accuracy – «rust had eaten into the bronze flesh» (p. 232) – dramatizes the idea of torture, which directly echoes Joseph Walters' body devoured by flaming embers.

These different atmospheric, decorative and symbolic notations adumbrate the subsequent macabre discovery of the tortured body of Joseph Walters, much before the moment when Dyson becomes sensitive to the smell of burnt flesh: «But upon the middle of the body a fire of coals was smouldering, the flesh had been burnt through. The man was dead, but the smoke of his torment mounted still, a black vapour» (p. 234).

## 7 The Aesthetic Impure, Modernity and Metatextual Effects

In this strange, hybrid, formally impure narrative, the true detective is indeed the reader. The investigation concerns also the meaning of specific words and the way they help correlate various unconnected events. Each secondary narrator tells an unreliable story aiming at deceiving the narratee. But the story may contain a grain of truth, hence the constant parallels drawn between the true situation of the impostors and their fictitious personae. An illustration is provided by the comparison between the two narratives of Helen, that of the missing brother and «The Novel of the White Powder», supposedly told by Miss Leicester, another mask for Helen. Both stories concern missing brothers, but in the first narrative, the anecdote serves as a prelude to the far more complex story of the Black Seal in which professor Gregg, a scientist open to the irrational, also investigates

on a strange case. In the same way, «The Novel of the White Powder» tells the story of the disappearance of a brother in horrific circumstances. This time, it is not the brother's companion who is seen as a living corpse but the brother himself who, having absorbed a seemingly harmless white powder, undergoes an abject transformation. Under the effect of this *Vinum sabbati*, the young man gets carried away and becomes corrupt like Dorian Gray or Helen Vaughan, the evil heroine of *The Great God Pan*. This is how the narrator describes the ultimate stage of the metamorphosis: «There upon the floor was a dark and putrid mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes and bubbling with boily bubbles like boiling pitch. And out of the midst of it shone two burning points like eyes [...] and something moved and lifted up what might have been an arm» (p. 126).

One finds again the motif of the mutilated member, which evokes the vision of the living-dead character that accompanies the brother in Miss Lally's narrative. The link confirms the fictional nature of the tale she tells, sprinkled as it is with gothic conventions and clichés, at times verging on parody. Indeed, in «Adventure of the Missing Brother», the female narrator tells a sensational tale of the supernatural, describing with a hyperbolic style the uncanny gruesome spectacle of the frightening character with a rotting hand which supposedly leads her brother onwards: «I saw the hand that held him by the arm, and seemed to guide him, and in one moment of horror I realized that it was a formless thing that had mouldered for many years in the grave. The flesh was peeling in strips from the bones, and hung apart dry and granulated, and the fingers that encircled my brother's arm were all unshapen claw-like things, and one was but a stump from which the end had rotted off» (pp. 135-136). Despite (or because of) the melodramatic tone and the use of Poesque cosmic metaphors of chaos («the heavens and the earth seemed to rush together with the sound of thunder», p. 135), the reader may find it difficult to believe the story. Miss Lally's description of her brother reminds of the young man with spectacles while the person accompanying him wears a bowler hat like Joseph Wilkins. She also expresses feelings («there seemed almost a twinkling as of mirth about her eyes», p. 137) quite at odds with the tragic predicament she describes.

In «Novel of the Black Seal», Miss Lally's narrative is more complex and corroborated by two other embedded testimonies: first a manuscript written by a scientist, Dr. Chambers, who testifies that the white powder is used during sabbaths, then a short letter by an eye witness, Dr. Haberdern. The reader is then constantly placed in an unstable situation, wondering whether s/he should believe an incredible, but very intense and vivid story, or deny its authenticity as part of a fabulation, a set of lies. But what is the fabulation about? Is it limited to the shift of identity or does it concern the contents of the story? The mystery is never clarified. At the end of her

story, Helen masquerading as Miss Lally evokes again the «young man with spectacles», supposedly her lost brother.

In «*Novel of the White Powder*», the same Helen (Miss Leicester), addressing Dyson at the end of her narrative, refers to «a youngish man, with dark whiskers» (p. 212), as a detective on her trail because he suspects her of having killed her brother. When Dyson, a bit suspicious at last, refuses to help her, she goes off into a shriek of laughter which is again at odds with the fear she has just expressed. Dyson, as a narratee, is thus confronted with heterogeneous moods and tones and so is the reader whose emotions may be divided. Here Machen combines a tale of supernatural horror and a parodic form of crime fiction, a clear case of aesthetic impurity.

Thus, the reader seeks to find clues to back up his hypothesis. On first or second reading he will associate apparently disconnected signs: when Dyson meets casually a man defined as «an indefinite-looking figure» (p. 216) hidden to the eye by his garment, he seems not to realize that it could be Joseph Walters, the young man with spectacles. However the reader may, at this stage, identify him. It is only much later that Dyson has a revealing intuition: «It suddenly flashed into Dyson's mind that he knew the man; it was undoubtedly the young man with spectacles for whom so many ingenuous persons were searching» (p. 217). The true story of Walters as told in the pocket-book («an old-fashioned notebook, bound in faded green marroco», p. 217) alludes to fragments of other secondary plots: his projects are close to those of Miss Lally's brother. The circumstances of his disappearance recall those of the first fictive brother. Joseph Walters' initiation to evil practices thanks to the wine of the Fauns also evokes that of Miss Leicester's unfortunate brother. In both cases, a potent and magic potion and impious rituals and sexual perverted practices are mentioned.

Dr. Lipsius, the criminal mastermind, is present implicitly in three narratives: that of Wilkins, another narrative of Burton (Davies) and the «*Novel of the Iron Maid*» where the collector of torture instruments dies a victim of the mechanism, the bronze lips laid on his own lips. This torture echoes other tortures described in Walters' narrative, that of the true owner of the gold coin transformed into a mummy, and that of Walters himself, burnt alive in atrocious conditions. A few other links can be established between the different narratives. If we compare the prologue and the epilogue, for instance, striking similitudes are revealed. The prologue refers to the entrance door which remains open, against Richmond's advice: «We'll leave the front door open. He may like to see company» or «Let the door stand open» (p. 102). This is taken up by Mr. Phillips at the end of the narrative: «I may mention that the door of the house is open» (p. 232).

Retrospectively, the reader may correlate this last scene with the words *in medias res* of the prologue: «and Mr. Joseph Walters is going to stay the night?» (p. 102). The sardonic smile of the three companions and the references to signs of closure suggest a story ending: «There is nothing

else to be done», «It is finished at last» (p. 102). The tale will be told retrospectively, but in a serpentine and twisted way. Other references are explained or made interpretable *a posteriori*.

Moreover, and this attests to its modernity, the text refers to its own process of construction. The metatextual dimension is first present in Dyson's (as would be writer) reflections on literature, which function as a matrix, programming the forthcoming narrative: «The task of the literary man is to invent a wonderful story and tell it in a wonderful manner» (p. 105). However his friend Phillips is more specific and highlights the importance of manner rather than matter: «The matter is of little consequence; the manner is everything. Indeed the highest skill is shown in taking matter apparently common place and transmuting it by the high alchemy of style into the pure gold of art» (pp. 105-106). This alchemical metaphor is central in Machen's work. Later Dyson announces, unconsciously, the textual labyrinth that is provided to the reader, setting the terms of a reading contract: «I see the plot thicken; our steps will henceforth be dogged with mystery and the most ordinary incidents will teem with significance. [...] A clue, tangled if you like, has been placed by chance in our hands; it will be our business to follow it up» (p. 110).

Dyson uses the double terms «clue» and «tangle», thus relating the index and the image of the labyrinth which Machen often uses to depict London streets. Dyson also evokes the task he has to assume, to follow a certain track, starting from a chance encounter or object. But Dyson is mistaken when he believes that he can fill in this part. Indeed only chance (not his own abilities) enables him to be a witness to the denouement of the plot. As to the criminals, they all escape punishment, which would be fairly provocative in a classic tale. Moreover, Machen plays with the conventions of the crime novel so as to subvert them by introducing a form of ambiguity which helps trigger fantastic effects, but also compels the reader to perform crucial interpretive tasks, offering him a particularly tortuous and mystifying reading contract.

## 8 Conclusion

*The Three Impostors* enables us to approach the notion of the aesthetic impure from various angles. The novel expresses Machen's obsession with rottenness, the amorphous and the viscous, with body metamorphosis, physical degeneracy and devolution, but also with moral and spiritual degradation. Occult rituals and scientific experiments lead to the same result, hybridization between the human and the non-human. Jervase, the idiotic character of «The Novel of the Black Seal», even projects a tentacle while Francis Leicester's body turns into a putrid mass equated with primordial slime. The London urban setting reflects this hybridity, this



blurring of boundaries, by contrasting or blending poverty with affluence, dereliction with luxury, beauty with ugliness, light versus darkness. Atmospheric phenomena, natural processes of degradation mirror dramatic events. Some characters, like Dr. Lipsius, embody the desire for extreme experiences or transgressive patterns of behaviour, but the reader himself is attracted toward the dramatized spectacle offered by uncanny, interstitial, unstable, horrifying creatures and objects. The abject, the monstrous, the ugly, architectural decay, become a source of aesthetic fascination, of violent emotion, of 'pathological' pleasure for some of the protagonists in the diegetic universe, even if, as regards the reader, irony, parody and pastiche introduce, at times, a form of distance from the explicit horror or terror generated by the narrative.

The second type of aesthetic impurity is related to the text's unstable generic identity. *The Three Impostors* is both a collection of autonomous short stories and a novel which connects these stories loosely by means of a frame narrative. Moreover these stories use the conventions of various genres, including popular and more established ones. The investigative mode is foregrounded because of the prominence of amateur detectives like Dyson, the presence of criminal plots and the issues of quest and pursuit. However, the gothic mode is also emphasized and its various tropes are mobilized. Other secondary narratives lead us far away from London, enhancing a form of exotic adventure set in the American wilderness or Italy while the narrative also transports us into such remote historical periods as ancient Rome, the Medieval era or even the more archaic and legendary time of the «little people» in the dark forests of Wales.

Machen does express a number of anxieties of his age concerning the risk of devolution and hybridity, «reverse colonization», the return of the archaic, the pagan past, the presence of perversion and crime at the heart of the city. But he also manages to instil forms of impurity into the very textual fabric, hence also the highly reflexive dimension of his fiction. The Welsh writer who was for a time a member of a secret society, the Golden Dawn, partakes of the revival of mysticism and the occult, which goes together with nostalgia and a certain criticism of the excesses and alienating character of his contemporary world (which does not prevent the use of modern narrative devices). His fiction testifies indeed to his fascination with ancient gods, supernatural dionysian creatures, obscure and secret rituals, but also monstrous mutations questioning the limits of the human paradigm and scientific hubris. In that respect, he advocates an aesthetic impure which characterizes the nineteenth century fin de siècle.

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## Consumerism, Celebrity Culture and the Aesthetic Impure in Oscar Wilde

Pierpaolo Martino

(Università degli Studi di Bari, Italia)

**Abstract** This article investigates the discursive arena in which Oscar Wilde exercised his countercultural and necessarily impure aesthetic taste, focusing on some defining aspects and texts of Wilde's epopee, namely his cult of celebrity, which was nourished, in particular, by his 1882 tour of the United States, his interest in performance – which turned the author into the director and main actor of the very drama entitled 'Oscar Wilde' – and his apparently contradictory approach to consumer culture. Wilde, indeed, seemed to embrace opposite stances in relation to consumerism as it is witnessed by such works as «The Soul of Man Under Socialism» and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the one side, and «The Decay of Lying», *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, on the other. This article also reads Wilde's last play *The Importance of Being Earnest* in terms of a «performance about performance», rooted as Wilde's previous plays in consumer culture and capable of deconstructing the Victorian highly normative (and 'rational') approach to gender and, in particular, to masculinity.

**Summary** 1 Staging 'Oscar Wilde': Celebrity, Iconicity and Performance in Wilde's Discourse. – 2 Oscar Wilde in America and the Aesthetic Impure. – 3 Writings from a Consumer Age: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*. – 4 Coda: The Importance of 'Being' Oscar.

**Keywords** Celebrity. Consumerism. Oscar Wilde. Performance.

### 1 Staging 'Oscar Wilde': Celebrity, Iconicity and Performance in Wilde's Discourse

In the introductory notes to *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (2007) Paul Fortunato focuses on Wilde's ambiguity in relation to consumer culture, noting how one of Wilde's most famous essays, «The Soul of Man Under Socialism», seems to stand as a powerful critique of consumerism and of the practitioners of consumer culture in both journalism and fashion. Nevertheless, a play like *Lady Windermere's Fan*, written just a few months after the essay, seems to legitimate that very culture standing as Wilde's first big commercial success, capable of attracting a very vast audience. As queer theorists have shown, Wilde's most interesting feature is his liminality, his capacity for

rejecting a fixed, predictable, centralizing frame of mind, in short, his resistance to the irreconcilability of contradictory, even opposite realities; in this sense, Wilde's impure 'aesthetics' – with its roots in capitalist consumerism – seems to reflect this very complexity.

Wilde cleverly manipulated consumer culture in order to articulate a fresh and intelligent discourse in which the very interplay of surface, image and ritual allowed him to elevate elements which Victorian culture tended to marginalize – «things gendered feminine, considered as bodily rather than rational, and often marked as Oriental» – in order to «de-center the Western, rationalist, masculinist subject» offering in this way a «conception of art that is not anti-Western but otherwise-than-Western» (Fortunato 2007, p. ix).

In the present article, we will try – through a theoretical and methodological frame in which Bakhtinian dialogism, Celebrity, Performance and Masculinities Studies speak to each other – to access and investigate the discursive arena in which the author exercised his countercultural (and necessarily impure) aesthetic taste. We will focus in particular on some defining aspects and texts of Wilde's epopee, namely his cult of celebrity, which was also nourished by his 1882 tour of the United States, his interest in performance – which, as we will see, turned him into the director and actor of the very drama entitled 'Oscar Wilde' – and his apparently contradictory aesthetic stance. Wilde, indeed, seemed to embrace opposite and irreconcilable approaches to consumerism, as it is witnessed by such works as «The Soul of Man Under Socialism» and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the one side, and «The Decay of Lying», *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, on the other.

Wilde managed, in the highly normative and morally rigid context of late Victorian England, to turn himself into something resembling a contemporary celebrity. Interestingly, Su Holmes and Sean Redmond stress how celebrity does not reside in the individual: it is constituted discursively, «by the way in which the individual is represented» (Holmes, Redmond 2010, p. 4). Of course, the issue of representation is of paramount importance in any discourse 'by' and 'on' Oscar Wilde; if on the one hand Wilde, in his complex effort of self-promotion, became «the most self-conscious marketer of his own image» (Kaye 2004, p. 193), on the other, in this very process of construction, the media of the time played a key role, which, however, at times exceeded the possibility of control by the author himself.

Making reference to some of the caricatures circulating on such magazines as *Moonshine* – and in particular to the one entitled «days with celebrities» (1882), portraying an iconic Wilde holding a sunflower – Lois Cucullu notes how

Wilde was acclaimed and mocked as a celebrity in English society, when the very category and term, as scholars and critics have shown,

were just gaining attraction in the popular vernacular. Indeed the scholarly community writing on celebrity has rightly come to regard him [...] as helping to inaugurate the phenomenon of celebrity culture that is one hallmark of twentieth- and twenty-first century modernity. (Cucullu 2010, p. 19)

The *Moonshine* caricature, as Cucullu observes, projects towards the collapse of the barrier separating private from public life that mass media would aggressively come to exploit, an issue on which almost all of the studies on celebrity seem to focus. In this sense, in *Celebrity*, Chris Rojek identifies four main features of celebrity. First of all, it implies «impact on public consciousness»; second, «celebrities are cultural fabrications», indeed, as Rojek observes, «no celebrity acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries» (Rojek 2001, p. 10). Third, celebrity always implies a split between private self and a public self, or between a ‘veridical self’ and a ‘public face’, indeed «the public presentation of the self is always a staged activity, in which the human actor presents a ‘front’ or ‘face’ to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve. For the celebrity the split between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ is often disturbing» (p. 11). Finally, Rojek identifies a fourth aspect relating to celebrity, that is the category of ‘renown’ referring «to the informal attribution of distinction within a given social network», which is typical of individuals who «have a sort of localized fame within the particular social assemblage of which they are a part», on the contrary «the fame of the celebrity is ubiquitous» (p. 12).

Wilde’s position seems particularly interesting if we take into account the artist’s and the man’s capacity for transcending spatial and temporal borders, articulating, in this sense, a complex condition of celebrity. In short, «the secret of [Wilde’s] success is given by the artist’s ability to translate his life into a form of writing and his writing into a vital gesture which articulates a complex critique of late nineteenth century English society» (Martino 2013, p. 140). According to cultural critic Michael Bracewell – author of *England is Mine, Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (1997) and director of possibly the best TV documentary on Wilde, the 1997 *Oscar* (BBC) – the Anglo-Irish writer stands as the first pop star of British history, a pop idol, a cultural icon who put all his genius in his life and only his talent in his work, in the desperate and yet successful attempt to turn his life into a ‘work of art’.

If celebrity is constituted discursively, it can be argued that Wilde’s iconicity implies a kind of double articulation based on a complex discourse involving past and present; Wilde’s iconicity also relates, indeed, to the author’s after-life. Wilde not only became a celebrity in his own time, but ‘wrote’ and performed a script which – through a number of cultural appropriations and performances – gave him iconic status in today’s popular

culture. Indeed, in the twentieth and in the twenty-first centuries, Wilde's self-conscious construction of his identity and his performance of an ironic masculinity (Beynon 2002) have become sources of inspiration for many artists such as Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, Stephen Fry, David Bowie, Gavin Friday, Morrissey and Will Self (a self-confessed fan of Wilde) in key fields such as music, literature, cinema and television, showing how the strength of Wilde's life and work also resides in the ease with which they are translated into non-literary modes.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing Wilde in terms of 'icon' also implies referring to him in terms of «a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration» (OED 1999, p. 704). Undoubtedly, there is a religious aspect connected with Wilde's iconicity, which today brings admirers to worship both his image and the many dimensions connected to that image (it is possible to speak, indeed, of a Wilde cult; his image and his epigrams are everywhere on t-shirts, album covers, posters). According to Rojek, «as modern society developed, celebrities have filled the absence created by the decay in the popular belief in the divine rights of kings, and the death of God» (Rojek 2001, pp. 13-14). In short, in coincidence with the emergence of consumerism the belief in God waned and celebrities became immortal; Rojek makes reference to such icons as John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, addressing them in terms of «idols of cult worship», idols whose fame is also connected to a tragic dimension, something which, of course, also happens with Wilde. Interestingly, Terry Eagleton entitled a play focusing on Wilde's life *Saint Oscar* (1997), a title which, besides projecting towards the tragic epilogue of Wilde's parable, also makes reference to a trend in gay studies and in gay culture in general to see Wilde as the first homosexual martyr of history; something which seems to connect to Wilde's 'construction' of himself in *De Profundis*, where the author emerges as a Christ-like figure to be opposed to the demonic representation of Douglas.

In order to fully understand Wilde's iconic status, it is necessary to analyse the man or rather the many men, the many roles played or better 'performed' by Wilde in his lifetime. In this sense, Waldrep observes how:

1 Interestingly in his 1998 cult movie *Velvet Goldmine*, Todd Haynes offers his audience the image of Wilde as pop icon and idol, featuring two kinds of Wildean performance: the character of Oscar Wilde (presented as a young student who in a Victorian school scene stands and declares «I want to be a Pop Idol») as well as a number of other male characters, moving within the world of 1970s glam culture, who stage their Wildean interest in artifice, self-construction, and gender bending. In the opening scene the infant Wilde is brought to earth on a glittering spaceship that moves like a shooting star, a sequence through which Haynes refers to Wilde's extraterrestrial genius; then we find ourselves in the second half of the twentieth century, where the main character (Arthur) is trying to investigate the mysterious disappearance of glam-rock star Brian Slade, a fictional equivalent of 1970s icon David Bowie.



Wilde's trajectory was not toward some ultimate being, but the beginning in earnest of a system of becoming, that left any belief that there could be a natural, stable Oscar Wilde. Wilde's legacy as both a writer and a literary figure of social, political and cultural significance is such that Wilde the man cannot be readily separated by Wilde the careerist. His roles, as aesthete, lecturer, businessman, family man, poet, editor, playwright, seducer, prisoner and exile are part of a broader role of writer as performer that he used self-consciously in an attempt to destroy the binary opposition, separating art and life. (Waldrep 2004, p. xiii)

In this perspective, Wilde's life can be usefully analyzed through the theoretical frame offered by performance studies. According to Coppa:

Performance studies recognizes that behavior, as well as speech, is a language that has rules and is structured by a grammar, and, as with any other language, comprehension depends on re-cognition or knowing something again when we see it. (Coppa 2004, p. 73)

In short, performing doesn't simply mean doing, but «showing doing», in short 'staging' behavior. All human behavior is learned and then put on some sort of display. In this regard, Heather Marcowitch notes how:

The poetics of the performance of the self, according to Wilde are disarmingly simple: assume and always be conscious of one's inherent fragmentary nature, cultivate each fragment to the best of its artistic possibilities and do so under the rubric of a secular morality that stresses compassion and community with others. (Marcowitch 2010, p. 13)

Wilde's capacity for self-fashioning and marketing his identities owes much to his very peculiar background, in which a key role is played, by his Oxford/early London years, by his tour of the United States and by the successful productive season starting with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which includes the composition (and the first performances) of his major theatrical works.

As is well known, the young Wilde made a very good impression at Oxford with his beautiful figure, elegance of manners and brilliant conversation. At Oxford he performed the role of the Englishman; as John Sloan observes: «Wilde's lifelong performance was actually that of an Oxonian, which meant a distinct feeling of cultural superiority to the rest of society» (Sloan 2003, p. 6). Wilde adopted an Oxford accent, developing «his own languid, melodic version, of the intonations of his Oxford friends» (p. 6). This transformation at the prosodic level was also accompanied by interesting visual developments. Besides adopting a dandified look and way of dressing, with long hair and velvet suits, Wilde started decorating his Magdalen rooms with

blue vases filled with lilies, the recognized symbol of the then fashionable Pre-Raphaelites. As we will see, practices such as these are particularly significant and illuminating in relation to Wilde's commitment to consumer culture and project towards the very aesthetics that will nourish his mature works from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to *An Ideal Husband*.

Interestingly, when Wilde came down from Oxford to London in 1879 he self-designated himself on his visiting cards as «professor of aesthetics». In London Wilde had not only to reinvent himself but also to make his way in the commercial world, in which, of course, the press played a crucial role. As Sloan observes:

the production and underconsumption of new commodities initiated the modern techniques of advertising. The process also absorbed and assimilated the artist turning the earlier image of the artist as hero and critic of society into the commodified image of the artist as colorful personality. (p. 10)

And yet Wilde used the new methods of advertising in order to oppose the very culture in which they were taking root. Besides, Wilde was also taking advantage of the mixing of higher and middle classes, which offered opportunities for mobility. In this sense, his visibility was also given by his ability to be everywhere, offering his precious epigrams and observations and mixing with celebrities such as Lillie Langtry.

## 2 Oscar Wilde in America and the Aesthetic Impure

Wilde became a global celebrity during his 1882 tour of the United States; as any contemporary pop star in order to become a proper celebrity he had first to be 'big' in America. The chance was given by the success of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience or Bunthorne's Bride* (1881), which focused on the look and manner of the aesthete in the character of Bunthorne. Richard D'Oyly Carte, the show's producer, offered Wilde a series of promotional lectures to provide American audiences with the chance to see a real life aesthete; a similar practice was to become quite popular in the 1960s with British rock and pop artists, such as the Beatles, promoting their albums in long American tours. Interestingly, Wilde didn't link his name with opera as a form of high art but with operetta as a form of low culture entertainment.

Legend says that on his arrival in New York a customs official asked him if he had anything to declare, Wilde promptly answered: «I have nothing to declare except my genius» (Morris 2013, p. 1); Wilde's famous epigram is, among other things, a sign of his astonishing linguistic and conversation skills,

in an attempt to transcribe his unique style of lecturing, one American journalist went so far as to devise a system of diacritical marks to represent the elaborate pauses and inflections that Wilde would use to manipulate his audience. (Waldrep 2004, p. 66)

Indeed Wilde's speech was music. He was a great improviser who knew that society – that is, any form of social interaction – is, as Schutz (1976) puts it, playing music together. In this musical performance, in which he mixed different genres (stories, philosophy, wit), very often form becomes more relevant than content. Wilde's epigrams, which he would easily utter in his speeches with the same elegance and stillness of his characters, were in a sense evergreen melodies on which he improvised in different contexts. Indeed Wilde – as a man and artist fully immersed in consumer culture – used to recycle his epigrams in plays, essays and everyday conversation. In this sense one might create a link between Wilde and a great American icon, Andy Warhol, himself «of the Wilde sort» (as E. M. Foster's Maurice defines himself in the 1914 novel), who based much of his art on seriality and who, like Wilde, treated trivial things as the most important of things and vice versa.

Wilde prepared carefully for his tour. In this sense he became much concerned about what to wear and thought of a costume for his tailor to make; those who saw his first appearances in the States remember his green overcoat and Polish cap. Most importantly, during the tour hundreds of photographs were shot of the aesthete in his poses, like the famous Sarony photos which – showing Wilde in his typical costume for the American tour, with his velveteen jacket and knickers and his well-known long hair – perfectly capture the author's look and capacity for self-promotion.

Wilde «was aware, as he had been at Trinity and Oxford, that he had no talent for oratory. He repeatedly confessed as much in America. What he had to do was to cultivate a way of charming rather than coercing his audience» (Ellmann 1987, p. 147). Wilde prepared his first lecture in America with this very awareness in mind; probably he was waiting to measure the cultural temperature before doing so. The first of the three major lectures he delivered in the States was entitled «The English Renaissance of Art» (the remaining two were entitled «The Decorative Arts» and «The House Beautiful»).

In «The English Renaissance of Art» he offered a reconsidered aestheticism; Wilde's aesthetic taste appeared, indeed, as a necessarily impure one. It is well known that, in «Economimesis», Derrida (1981) offers a reading of Kant's view of aesthetic judgment in *The Critique of Judgment* in which he shows how the idealist elaboration of the aesthetic as an ontological question (with its implicit stress on an idea of purity) necessarily excludes consideration of the material and historical forces that are continually transforming representational practices and aesthetic experiences.

Wilde, as we have seen, was well aware of these forces and shaped his aesthetics accordingly; in this sense his discourse was capable of resolving, or better harmonizing, in an extremely complex and intelligent way, such dichotomies as body and soul, external and internal.

It is important to stress how Wilde's aesthetics<sup>2</sup> and his very idea of beauty are the outcome of a complex process of harmonization of the theories of his two masters, namely Ruskin and Pater (even though, it must be said, many of Wilde's ideas are more heavily indebted to Pater's doctrine). As is well known, for Ruskin beauty had to be associated with good, while for Pater it could have the taste of evil. If Ruskin was interested in religion, Pater was more attracted by the excesses of mysticism; moreover, Ruskin's credo privileged conscience and discipline, while Pater's was a doctrine centred on imagination, and which considered beauty as something contextual.

2 Wilde's aesthetics finds a 'critical' systematization in six major essays written by the author between 1885 and 1890: «The Truth of Masks» (1885), «The Decay of Lying» (1889), «Pen, Pencil and Poison» (1889), «The Critic as Artist» (1890) – which were published together in a volume significantly entitled *Intentions* (1891) – «The Portrait of Mr. W.H.» (an 1889 long narrative on the theme of forgery) and «The Soul of Man Under Socialism» (1890). An overview of the different subjects developed by Wilde in these essays can be found in two short essays: Longxi (1988) and Becker-Leckrone (2002). Longxi articulates a defence of Wilde's position as a serious Late-Victorian thinker, creating a link between Wilde's «creative criticism», his praise of «lying» in art and more recent theoretical currents. Becker-Leckrone, besides pointing to Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a distillation of the paradoxical, equivocal theoretical framework the essays collectively establish, stresses (making reference to Dowling, 1986) how Wilde's use of paradox and other verbal complexities do not represent a funny camouflage for serious ideas, but «performative» demonstrations of them. As we have already noted, in Wilde's discourse, form and content very often coincide, according to a profoundly musical stance. Danson (1997) concentrates, in an extremely rich text, on «the artist in his criticism» with a special focus on the 1891 collection. He sets Wilde's criticism in context and shows how the Anglo-Irish writer sought to create a new ideal culture by elevating «lies» above history, almost erasing the distinction between artist and critic, and ending the sway of «nature» over human desire. Wilde's criticism is also at the centre of a 1997 study by Brown in which the author attempts to define Wilde's conceptions of what art is and what it is not and of what the experience of art means in the modern world, tracing the experimental character of Wilde's thought from its resonance in his own life through its development within the tradition of aesthetic philosophy. As we have already seen, Wilde's aesthetics seems to exceed the author's 'intentions' to embrace on the one side what Fortunato (2007) defines in terms of «modernist aesthetics» and on the other what Waldrep (2004) has addressed in terms of «aesthetics of self-invention» which, deriving from Wilde's interest in masks and appearance, stands as a critical space to access the postmodern fascination with performance. It is here also worth mentioning Volume IV of the *OET* critical edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2007) edited by Josephine Guy which includes «Intentions» and «Historical Criticism» (1879) and offers invaluable commentary and notes, giving details of where phrases, arguments and sources similar to those of the essays are used in other works in Wilde's *oeuvre*. Once again, Wilde's aesthetics emerges as something which can hardly be limited to theoretical formulations; in Wilde theory and practice, art and life always coincide, there is no space for purity, his aesthetics is a process not a product, which exceeds spatial and temporal boundaries and asks for an active response by the reader.

Wilde's capacity for synthesizing different even opposite perspectives conveyed a remarkable strength to the ideas he introduced during his American lectures. With regard to «The English Renaissance of Art» Ellmann notes how:

By beautifying the outward aspects of life, [Wilde] would beautify the inner ones. To disarm those who expected him to say what beauty was, he quoted Goethe in support of defining beauty by example, not by philosophical hairsplitting. The English Renaissance was, he said, like the Italian Renaissance before it, 'a sort of new birth of the spirit of man'. Under this rubric he could discuss the desire for a more gracious and comely way of life, the passion for physical beauty, the attention to form rather than content, the search for new subjects of poetry, for new forms of art, for new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments. The new Euphorion was, as Goethe had foreseen, the product of mating Hellenism and romanticism, Helen of Troy and Faust. [...] It was the capacity to render, not the capacity to feel, which brought true art into being. And once in being, art conferred upon life a value it had not heretofore had. Its creations were more real than the living. [...] Wilde was piecing together his later discovery that life imitates art. (Ellmann 1987, pp. 157-158)

The lecture was first delivered in New York on 9 January. Wilde impressed the audience with his attire and his very peculiar modality of enunciation. He entered on stage with a circular cavalier cloak over his shoulder; his voice was clear, easy and not forced, he changed pose now and then, the head inclining towards the strong foot, and kept a general appearance of repose.

What Wilde had succeeded in presenting and 'selling' was not so much precepts as a personality. That personality became the subject of vivid contention as he zigzagged impossibly across the country on a tour which lasted until 27 December.

Many so took to heart Wilde's proclaimed mission «to make this artistic movement the basis for a new civilization» (Hofer, Scharnhorst 2010, p. 99), that craft societies and museum patronage blossomed in his wake. Letters home had Wilde crowing that he was a bigger genius than Dickens; in this sense, the personal adulation necessitated three secretaries, of whom Wilde wrote: «one writes my autographs all day for my admirers, the other receives the flowers that are left really every ten minutes. A third whose hair resembles mine is obliged to send off locks of his own hair to the myriad maidens of the city, and so is rapidly becoming bald» (Holland, Davis 2000, p. 126).

Wilde was, however, an easy, if not eager target in America. A few mocked his poetry or his ideas, including the self-assured Scot Archibald

Forbes who found Wilde's knee breeches particularly repellent; some, at their peril, mocked his utterances and if a few newspapers took his side, the greater number tried to make him look foolish. In this sense, Wilde's gender bending and coded performances were scorned publicly; he was mocked as a degenerate in satirical cartoons, a monkey with a flower, in such papers as *Harper's Weekly* and the *Washington Post*. It must be stressed, however, how for Wilde newspapers basically meant interviews, which represented a very precious resource for the construction of his celebrity.

Wilde sat for at least ninety-eight interviews while touring North America between January and November 1882, which again the aesthete conducted as if they were proper performances. As Hofer and Scharnhorst observe:

The interviewer would arrive to find him playing the part of the idle aesthete, lounging in a chair or on a sofa. Wilde would leap to his feet, shake the interviewer's hand, and offer him a seat. At the first prompt he would deliver a scripted line (e.g. «No art is better than bad art»). The conversation would end at a predetermined moment when his manager or valet would enter the room. (Hofer, Scharnhorst 2010, p. 4)

Interviewers, as Wilde knew, were a 'product' of American civilization. Celebrity interviews began to appear in American newspapers in the early 1870s and traveling lectures were a convenient source of copy for reporters. While Henry James and Mark Twain decried the new celebrity culture, Oscar Wilde, like Whitman, embraced it creating a paradigm to perform for the new generations up until the new millennium.

And yet, as we have said, newspapers and journalists often attacked him. This paradoxically gave Wilde a new confidence. They could attack him, but they could not take their eyes off him. Derision was a form of tribute, and if it went on long enough, could not fail to be so interpreted. He could moreover appeal, over the heads of the journalists, to the people. During the twelve months in America, he learned how to mock his mockers; this is also, in a sense, the essence of contemporary celebrity culture.

After a few weeks from his arrival in New York, Wilde discovered that he would need another lecture besides «The English Renaissance»; in this sense, he wrote not one but two more lectures:<sup>3</sup> «The Decorative Arts» and «The House Beautiful». The first was more closely linked to «The English Renaissance», drawing upon Ruskin and Morris for its examples. In «The Decorative Arts»:

3 A fourth lecture entitled «The Irish Poets of 1848» was delivered first in San Francisco at the end of March and then in a few other places. In it he focused on Smith O' Brien, John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan.

Wilde described the recent rise of handicrafts in England, and the advantage of having work made by delighted craftsmen rather than by unfeeling machines.<sup>4</sup> He moved fluently from point to point, not worrying much about organization, trusting to what quickly became dependable pattern. Modern dress was ignoble, as could be seen in sculptures [...] There must be schools of art, and these must be in more immediate relation with trade and manufacturing than now. Art should portray the men who cover the world with a network of iron and the sea with ships. (Ellmann 1987, p. 183)

The second lecture, «The House Beautiful», was even more prescriptive. Here Wilde's performative skills, his theatrical and complex enunciation proved, more than in other cases, of paramount importance:

Wilde metaphorically walked through the house, commenting on the mistakes he had observed. The entrance hall should be papered, since it was too close to the outdoors; wainscoting was better. It should not be carpeted but tiled. Secondary colors should be used on walls and ceilings of rooms. Large gas chandeliers should be replaced by side brackets. Windows must be small to avoid glaring light. Ugly heating stoves must give way to Dutch porcelain stoves. No artificial flowers. Blown glass rather than cut glass. Queen Anne furniture. He passed on the house's inhabitants and the subject of dress. Women should eschew furbelows and corsets, and emulate the drapery on Greek statuary. As for men the only well dressed men he had seen in America were the Colorado miners with wide-brimmed hats and long cloaks. Knee breeches like his were more sensible than trousers. After such instructions Wilde passed on the relation of art to morals. Instead of saying there was none, he argues that art had a spiritual ministry; it could raise and sanctify everything it touched. (pp. 183-184)

The tour was undoubtedly a successful one. In his running commentary to friends at home he described some of the most striking moments. Referring to one talk in Leadville, a mining town in the Rocky Mountains, he wrote: «I spoke to them of the early Florentines, and they slept as though no crime had ever stained the ravines of their mountain home» (Holland, Davis 2000, p. 161). Wilde agreeably descended to the bottom of a silver mine in a bucket. There, to great cheering, he dined, drank whiskey and smoked a cigar, all but preamble to the main event:

4 Interestingly Wilde, while objecting to machine-made articles, allowed that machinery could in some ways free people for better use of time.



Then I had to open a new vein, or lode, which with a silver drill I brilliantly performed, amidst unanimous applause. The silver drill was presented to me and the lode named 'The Oscar'. I had hoped that in their simple grand way they would have offered me shares in 'The Oscar' but in their artless untutored fashion they did not. Only the silver drill remains as a memory of my night at Leadville. (p. 162)

While in the bar that same night with the miners and the female friends of the miners, Wilde noticed the sign «Please don't shoot the pianist; he is doing his best», which, in his short essay «Impressions of America», he defined as «the only rational method of art criticism he had ever come across» (Mason 1906, p. 31). Back in England, Wilde recalled this with delight. He wrote: «I was struck with this recognition of the fact that bad art merits the penalty of death, and I felt that in this remote city, where the aesthetic applications of the revolver were clearly established in the case of music, my apostolic task would be much simplified, as indeed it was» (Sherard 1906, p. 226).

The whole tour was as Ellmann puts it «an achievement of courage and grace, along with ineptitude and self-advertisement. Wilde succeeded in naturalizing the word aesthetic. However effeminate his doctrines were thought to be, they constituted the most determined and sustained attack upon materialistic vulgarity that America had seen» (Ellmann 1987, p. 195).

### **3 Writings from a Consumer Age: *The Picture Dorian Gray*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband***

Although the American tour turned him into an iconic figure, Wilde's fame is (especially today) strictly associated with his cult and only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91), a work which played a key role in the very process of construction of his celebrity status and in the mythical fall that followed the two trials, after which he articulated a new version of himself and of his celebrity status in the long epistola addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, commonly known as *De Profundis*. According to Cucullu:

Ironically what both fuels and hastens [Wilde's] physical downfall is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. At his first trial and thereafter, this story serves as evidence of Wilde's profligacy and his sodomitical associations that persist down to the present. So while the novella continues willy-nilly to be read as a melodramatic parable of deviance, moral corruption and self-destruction, it persists more radically as Wilde's uncanny foretelling of his own cultural rise and physical ruin. (Cucullu 2010, p. 21)

It is interesting to note how *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s three protagonists seem to reflect three aspects of Wilde himself; indeed, in a letter to Ralph Payne, Wilde declared: «Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages perhaps» (Holland, Davis 2000, p. 585). As Michael Gillespie observes, the tension between «the probity of Basil, the immorality of Lord Henry and the unabashed self-indulgence of Dorian combine to echo the author's conflicting feelings» (Gillespie 2007, p. x) during the early 1890s, and somehow inform the audience's response to his work and to his public persona in the following years. Interestingly, Wilde's cult novel can be read, more than any other work in Wilde's canon, as a complex and severe critique of consumerism itself, with, possibly, the only exception of «The Soul of Man under Socialism». In this essay, indeed, Wilde's interest in Christ led him (as will happen later with *De Profundis*) to write about the positive aspects of a non-materialistic life and the abandonment of wealth in the search for an ideal socialist society. In Wilde's account of Matthew 6:19-24, the idea that an individual should not «imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things [as] your affection is inside of you» (Wilde 1997a, p. 1047) assumes a heavily counter-cultural connotation, and seems to be somehow at odds with Wilde's own personality. But again Wilde's aesthetics is all about the coexistence and harmonization of contradictory, even opposite stances.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows the modality in which 'the soul of man under capitalism' can embrace corruption and self-destruction. In this sense, the harsh dissonance between Basil's and Lord Henry's views of Dorian highlights the discrepancy between an authentic love of beauty and the more superficial tension towards a materialistic desire. In this sense, Basil's enthusiasm for coming «face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself» (Gillespie 2007, p. 10) offers a more interesting and fascinating 'picture' of Dorian than Henry's idea that the young boy is «some brainless, beautiful creature, who should always be here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence» (p. 7). If on the one side Basil appreciates him for the charm of his character, on the other Henry's indifference for his intellectual skills in favour of his beauty reflects the consumerist propensities of Lord Henry himself, who almost appears to stand as a personification of materialistic culture itself. In this sense, Basil's desire for Henry not to meet Dorian can be read as a reflection of Wilde's criticism of materialism's corrupting influence. Indeed, when he affirms that «your influence would be bad» (p. 16), because it would contaminate Dorian's simple and beautiful nature, he points to the negative effects materialism can have on what we might define purity of 'the soul'.

Interestingly, Regenia Gagnier notes how in his only novel, through the character of Lord Henry, Wilde was able to capture «the essence of modern economic man when he named the cigarette the perfect type of a perfect pleasure because it left one unsatisfied. For this reason, of course, the cigarette is the perfect commodity» (Gagnier 1995, p. 299). Henry's idea that «What more can one want?» than an «exquisite» experience which «leaves one unsatisfied» (Gillespie 2007, p. 68) is investigated through Dorian's desire to lose himself in consumerism, as despite the 'exquisite' quality of the precious treasures he collects, he still feels ultimately restless and unfulfilled.

It is important to stress how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects the period's fascination with objects from around the world and for «sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance» (p. 109); the novel features memorable descriptions such as those of «the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates, and stitched over with iridescent beetles' wings; the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as 'woven air', and 'running water', and 'evening dew', [...] books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks, and wrought with *fleurs de lys*» (p. 116). The stage directions of some of his scripts also signal the author's interest in eccentric and exotic objects, as exemplified by the first act of *An Ideal Husband*, whose stage directions include references to «a great chandelier with wax lights which illumine a large eighteenth-century French tapestry representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher» (Wilde 1997b, p. 593) which seems to refer to the decadence of Sir Robert Chiltern's house. The specificity of the «large eighteenth century French tapestry representing the Triumph of Love from a design by Boucher [and] a Louis Seize sofa» not only indicates the social position and wealth of the characters, but also refers to the specificity of the upper-classes' artistic preferences, according to an aesthetic taste in which the author juxtaposes ornate rococo-style with a neo-classical one.

Besides using very old and often precious pieces of furniture, Wilde also commissioned several late Victorian artists and tailors to create contemporary works and dresses to make sure the stage was adorned with fashionable clothing and furniture. This was a significant choice, which gave his plays a fresh sense of style, as the visual dimension of his productions reflected the trends of the time. Interestingly, the playbills for the productions drew attention to the large number of people and companies involved in these areas, indeed, they «advertised the names of the interior designers (for the sets), for example, Walter Hann» and detailed that the «furniture and draperies were provided by Frank Giles, & Co., Kensington, [...] the dresses by Mesdames Savage and Purdue [and] the floral decorations [...] from Harrod's Stores» (Fortunato 2007, p. 96). Wilde's engagement with advertising and marketing reflects his relationship with the consumerist

culture of the day, as his affiliation with such high-class partnerships and organisations nourished the popularity and success of his plays through their joint promotion with such renown brands.

Wilde's plays functioned in brief as a contemporary showcase for the latest trends in fashion and interior design. Paul Fortunato highlights in particular the centrality of the fan in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892): the fan was a very fashionable consumer item at the late Victorian context, indeed, «in the fashion magazines, there were full illustrations of the dresses of the leading female characters in the play [such as Mrs Erlynne] and there were fine illustrations also of the enormous ostrich feather fan» (p. 95). Wilde was, in short, engaged in a very complex dialogue with the latest fashions of his time; if on the one side his plays were nourished by these very trends, on the other his art was able to activate new processes, to introduce new ideas and symbols which were in a sense 'appropriated' by the fashion market, in order to be sold to the mass audience. Interestingly, Rossetti, a major influence on Wilde, had achieved something similar in painting. Wilde himself had written in «The Decay of Lying» on how «a great artist invents a type, and life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in popular form, like an enterprising publisher» (Wilde 1997c, p. 933).

In this very essay the author focuses on the centrality of style in his (consumerist) aesthetics, stating that «it is style that makes us believe in a thing - nothing but style» (Wilde 1997c, p. 940); it is, in short, not the real thing that matters to the person, either as consumer or artist, it is the admixture of style that the artist has infused in the thing. Wilde anticipates in this way some basic assumptions emerging in the area of Cultural Studies between the 1970s and the 1980s from Hebdige's subcultural theory to Chambers' concept of lifestyle. Wilde understood how commodities could become vehicles of individual expression and of self-definition of identity.

Wilde's project had of course its 'political' implications. The author's intention was to present his consumerist aesthetics in terms of discourses of the irrational and the Oriental, capable of decentring the rationalist, Western subject. In this sense, Fortunato (2013) mentions a major work by Wilde, namely *An Ideal Husband* (1895), focusing on a significant exchange between Sir Robert Chiltern and 'the woman of fashion', Mrs Cheveley:

MRS. CHEVELEY: [Optimism and pessimism] are both of them merely poses.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Ah! The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women...merely adored.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.

MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do. (Wilde 1997b, p. 597)

Here Mrs Chevely introduces a number of binary oppositions (to be natural/to pose, rational/irrational) in order to question them to the extent of seeing one as an extension of the other; like Wilde she conceives life as a performance and resolves the opposition rational/irrational by pointing to a conception of reason which is centred on the body – that is, both on physical beauty and bodily needs – and which gives value to the ‘cultural’, that is the performative possibilities offered by consumerism. In this play as elsewhere, Wilde seems to be theorizing the positive, creative aspect of art’s link to consumer culture. When Mrs Cheveley specifies that «well-dressed» women represent the irrational, Wilde implies that the artist and the person of fashion are interested in the very same thing – representing an object (in the case of the woman, herself) not in an accurate flat-footed mode, but rather in a stylish, somehow distorted mode; interestingly, it is the very fact that women-of-fashion are commodified (that is «well-dressed») that gives them power. Mrs Cheveley becomes, in this perspective, a woman who is not afraid of commodity culture, to the extent of embracing its irrational ‘logic’.

In short, consumer culture is not only concerned with commodities, and with their value in a given market; consumerism always implies the emergence of specific lifestyles and the staging of very complex (context-bound) performances by social actors.

#### 4 Coda: The Importance of ‘Being’ Oscar

Wilde’s was a theatre that pointed to the centrality of the ‘dramatic’ aspects of everyday life. As we have seen, his own performance was part of his «self-promotion, which fed his professionalism» (Waldrep 2004, p. 689); Wilde, had a theatrical sense of life, his was a dialogical interiority (Holquist 1981) in which, as in a play, different personae spoke to each other without ever reaching a fixed, immutable truth (or identity).

Although the relevance of the plays we have already mentioned, namely *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, is unquestionable, Wilde’s most successful play of the 1890s remains *The Importance of Being Ear-*

*nest* (1895) which, in a sense, mirrors 'Oscar Wilde' as a living play with its focus on masks, double identities, inversion of gender roles and verbal complexities. The very title of the play refers to the idea of performance, to the importance of being, playing, performing someone else in particular contexts. Yet this is also a permanent condition: we are the differences, the different roles which we enact every day. In this sense, the play exceeds the page and the (theatrical) stage: the importance of being Earnest turns into the importance of being Oscar which again becomes the symbol of life as theatre and of an ironic approach to identity. The play reflects Wilde's interest in gender issues, questioning, once again, within a consumerist context, the normative and rational aspects of Victorian masculinity, focusing not so much on women's «irrationality» (as was the case with *An Ideal Husband*) as on men's queerness, expanding in a sense the work he had done elaborating the character of the dandy (namely, Lord Goring) in the play written a few months before. In Waldrep's view, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

like the post prison work has a typological function only to the extent to which it acts as an expression of Wilde's own interest of discovering the possibilities in himself. If *Dorian Gray* represented in the characters of Basil, Harry and Dorian – the splitting of his consciousness into three separate versions of himself, then Earnest carries his self into the arena of pure concept. It represents a world where queer space is not merely hinted but explicitly defined. (Waldrep 2004, p. 60)

The queerness at the heart of Earnest (and indirectly) of Wilde has sometimes been over-simplified. The play, according to some scholars, contains a clear homosexual politics and subtext. Sloan stresses how:

Jack and Algernoon both pretend to be Earnest in order to maintain a double life. Algernoon's special term for this – 'Bunburying' – has also been credited as another coded word for homosexual desire, a play on the slang word 'bun' for 'buttocks'. (Sloan 2003, p. 118)

Even without taking into account such readings, the relevance of the play still lies in the 'Oriental' and irrational subversion of rigidly conventional Victorian attitudes to gender and sexuality. Such attitudes are exemplified by the character of Gwendolen, who often acts and speaks against accepted norms concerning female behavior. In short, as Waldrep puts it, «*Earnest* is a performance about performance, as it is only by performing a gender – or a sexuality – via the use of masks and language that one can begin to manipulate and change the status quo» (Waldrep 2004, p. 59). And this brings us to the complex issue of Wilde's personal performance of gender.

As we have seen, there has been a general trend in twentieth century criticism to consider Wilde as the first gay martyr. For many, the trials which found Wilde guilty and gave him two years of hard labor coincided with the advent of a public homosexuality. In truth, Wilde's was an attempt to construct an alternative discourse on masculinity, which sharply contrasted with the rational, Western, imperial one so fashionable in Victorian England. As Alan Sinfield notices:

Wilde's principal male characters do look and sound like the mid-twentieth century stereotype of the queer man. They are effete, camp, leisured or aspiring to be, aesthetic, amoral, witty, insouciant, charming, spiteful dandified. If these characters are not offered as homosexual (and generally they are pursuing women characters), the whole ambience reeks, none the less, of queerness. Or rather, it does for us. And so does Wilde himself. (Sinfield 1994, p. vi)

Sinfield notes how Wilde's contemporaries «didn't see queerness in the way we have come to see it. [...] Wilde was perceived as effeminate, to be sure; but not thereby as queer» (p. vii). The term effeminacy, up until Wilde, did not mean being womanish, and consequently desiring men, but rather spending too much time 'on' and 'with' women, and consequently not being sufficiently occupied with proper manly pursuits. As we have seen Wilde was obsessed with fashion and interior design and he adored stars such as Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtree, who, in their time, were the equivalent of today's pop celebrities; most importantly, in 1887 Wilde became editor of *The Woman's World* which, thanks to contributions from prominent women writers, activists and actresses, tried to change conventional attitudes to women's history and women's life. In short Wilde was displaying and supporting effeminacy in ways potentially threatening to the establishment.

In an article entitled «The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and 'Modern' Women», Stetz (2001) shows how Wilde was capable of moving freely between male and female environments; he regularly attended universities, offices, clubs but also women's drawing rooms and workplaces, as we have already affirmed Wilde's most interesting feature is undoubtedly his liminality, his ability never to take sides, his refusal of a fixed, predictable, frame of mind, in short, his resistance to the irreconcilability of contradictory realities (see Eagleton 2001).

In *Masculinity and Culture*, John Beynon contrasts Wilde with Eugene Sandow, who in the 1890s, began to publish books on physical training which attracted a considerable readership. Whereas Sandow «stood for normal masculinity and the improvement of the national and racial stock Wilde represented the abnormal and was the living embodiment of the debauched» (Beynon 2002, p. 44). In this sense, Wilde's humiliation was



often considered as a victory for imperial masculinity and, by implication, for national and imperial health. Yet the twentieth century will witness the crisis of the British Empire and of the kind of masculinity associated with it. Paradoxically the defeat of Wilde implies the defeat of the Empire and the full emergence of Wilde's legacy, and in particular of Oscar's performative paradigm of masculinity as something capable of questioning the Victorian heavily normative approach to gender. As Joseph Bristow observes:

Although [Wilde] expired a month before the beginning of the century that eagerly embraced his controversial legacy, Wilde's achievements – ones that regularly unsettled some of his more conservative-minded contemporaries – would prove to be sources of inspiration for such diverse developments as franker depiction of marital discord on the English stage, campaigns for homosexual rights, the emergence of the culture of celebrity, critical methodologies that champion «the birth of the reader», and modern obsessions with the figure of the beautiful, though fatal young man. (Bristow 2008, p. xii)

As the first proper celebrity of the modern age, Wilde articulated an extremely complex consumerist aesthetics, which conveyed centrality to performance and style. Wilde's impure aesthetics seems to be one of the most relevant legacies of late Victorian culture, to which postmodernity itself – as we have come to know it, with its 'taste' for bricolage and the mixing of high and low cultures – is heavily indebted.

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